



Philosophe en Lisant (Rembrandt)



Ghosts and Bones

by

Jay Halpern

Men of darkness are they, who make a cult of the departed and of spirits. (Bhagavad-Gita, xviii.4)

©**2011**

Contents

1.	FOR SUZETTE	4
2.	EPIPHANY ON 47TH STREET	17
3.	DRAGON BREATHING FIRE	29
4.	STONED	37
5.	GHOSTS AND BONES	50
6.	THE SHRINE	61
7.	THE PROCESSION	79
7.	THE JOSEPH EXERCISES	91
8.	EARTH MOTHER	115
9.	THE BOUQUET	131
11.	MIRACLES	141
12.	THE FLOCK	157
13.	CODA	171

1. *FOR SUZETTE*

I took the sketch Suzette made of me and pinned it on my wall. She did it in pencil and dated it up and the top of the page in large cursive letters. She asked me what was my birthday and then added it in pencil below the date.

By looking at the drawing I could see myself through Suzette's eyes. My hair, pressed close to my skull from my hat, my beard, my broad East European face, my small, straight mouth, my sharp eyes. It was, in its way, the best picture I had ever seen of myself, much more thoughtful and expressive than any photo. Suzette laughed shyly when she handed it to me and, in slurred, misshapen sentences, she insisted I take it on my motorcycle when I left.

I set the mirror up on my desk when I returned home and lit the candle. In moments Moonstone appeared.

"Mr. Shaula," he said. "How can I help you?"

"Moonstone," I said, "I need your advice. I received a gift today and I'd like to return the favor. The woman who gave it to me, though, is retarded. I want to give her something in return which will delight her as much as her gift has delighted me, and I don't know how to choose such a gift."

Moonstone thought it over.

"I don't understand what you mean by 'retarded'," he said finally.

"She was born with a defective brain," I explained as best I could, "the nerves and chemical mechanisms don't work as they should. Many among us are born with the same condition, some more seriously damaged than others. Suzette is in her thirties and probably has the mental capacity of a 4 year old. But look how well she draws: this could pass for the work of a teenager. She obviously knows how well she draws and is eager to show off her talent. It may be the only talent she has. Probably the only one she's aware of."

"Why not simply ask her what things she likes?" Moonstone said.

"I may have to," I said. "But I'd prefer to surprise her."

Moonstone looked out from the mirror and off into space. He twisted a lock of his fine green hair.

"I'll see what I can come up with," he said.

And he disappeared, leaving my sharp-eyed face staring back at me.

§

Lucy told me she loved me but that she had to get me out of her life. I wasn't to take it personally, but I was too weird.

"Thanks, Lucy," I said, "I appreciate your honesty. Why you waited to tell me all that until after I fell in love with you beats me, but I guess those are the breaks. So long."

Actually, I wanted to throw something through her window, like a goblet or one of her crystal pyramids, or her blue Fu dog. I even went so far as to scan the room to see if anything was handy.

But I didn't. I refused to lose control in front of her. The motorcycle trip uptown, however, resembled motocross more than anything else. I treed two kids in Central Park and leaped a Con Ed construction hole with

a sharp twist of the throttle. I was known to make First Avenue from 1st Street all the way to 97th Street without hitting a light, and with Lucy on my mind, I could be dangerous.

"O Lucy," I thought to myself, "maybe it's just as well. Maybe this was inevitable."

I didn't believe it, though. I couldn't convince myself.

So I took the north park drive hairpin with my left knee grazing the tar.

§

I lit the candle and Moonstone appeared. Lucy had been on my mind all that day and I needed a break.

"Good evening, Mr. Shaula," he said. "I think I've solved your problem."

"Which one?" I asked. "I've got several."

"Why, your friend's gift, of course."

"Well, now, that's good to hear. An act of generosity right about now will do me a world of good."

"I entered her dreams last night for a quick look around. I must say, her inner landscape is most charming. Unusually light and airy for a woman her age. No violent or turbulent aspects like stormy seascapes or people in conflict. A few shadows on the fringe of consciousness, caves and that sort of thing, mostly associated with sexual matters. But those occur in all your people's dreams: I presume it's associated with your species as a whole."

"Yes, well, our sexuality. Much as it may irritate us, we do seem genetically predisposed toward the darker delights. However, that's our problem, not yours. What should I give Suzette?"

"A bunny," Moonstone said, smiling. "Evidently, she owned one as a little girl and it ran away. She imprinted on it and has never since articulated to anyone that she would like another. But I saw it burrowing all through her dreamscape, even breaking into some of the shaded places and bringing light. I may be wrong but a little grey bunny will delight her. Shall I arrange to get you one?"

"No thanks, Moonstone," I said. "I can manage that on my own. I appreciate your help in this matter."

"If I may say so, Mr. Shaula," he added, "your requests so far have been most moderate. May I remind you that I can offer you limitless and transcendental delights. You've hardly scratched the surface of my powers."

"Ah, Moonstone, do I detect the demon in you coming out? The tempter? Rest assured that when I need a transcendental delight, you'll be the first to hear of it."

"Very good, Mr. Shaula. Then shall I go?"

"Wait, Moonstone. Have you time for a little conversation?"

"My time is yours to command, Mr. Shaula."

"Listen, I'm not cut out for this 'commanding' business. Casual conversation is what I need right now. Or rather, what I would like. Do you have the time?"

"Of course."

"Well, then. Let's see. . ."

I have to commend Moonstone for his patience. His bright green face kept smiling pleasantly at me while I groped for casual things to say. I'm sure he saw right through me, that what I really was after was transcendental enlightenment, but I was having trouble admitting it to myself.

"What do you know about love, Moonstone?" I asked, finally.

"I suppose I know all that I need to know," he said.

"Hmmm." I drummed my fingers on the desk. "Are you being evasive?"

"I don't think so," he said, widening his large sloped eyes. "Love is an attachment between two or more beings that is of the highest magnitude. The nature of that attachment may be infinitely varied, however. When other beings have in the past spoken to me of love, I have always had to wait for their particular love-concept to emerge before I could fully understand what they wanted me to do for them."

"Then you've uh assisted other beings before me?"

"Not in this star system," he said. "But yes, I've had other assignments."

"Is that so? And there's love out there in other star systems?"

"Of course. It has its analogues everywhere."

"Hmmm. And you, yourself, Moonstone -- have you ever been in love?"

He smiled. "I have," he said.

"And how'd it turn out?"

"It had its moments."

"And?"

"And it no longer has its moments."

"You mean it's over?"

"Yes."

"That's sad, my friend. At least, I feel I can sympathize with a broken heart easier than conceive the end of love without sorrow. Maybe I, like the rest of my species, am a sentimentalist."

"There is a feeling of loss when love is no longer in your heart."

"And don't you wish you had never loved anyone in the first place when that happens?"

"I can grant you that wish, Mr. Shaula," said Moonstone. "If that's what you want."

He had me there.

"No, thank you, Moonstone," I said. "I guess I don't feel badly enough to wish it had never happened."

"That's good to hear, Mr. Shaula."

"That's good to be able to say, Moonstone."

§

I decided to bury myself in my work.

The first letter I opened was from Yakoma, Washington:

Dear Mr. Shaula:

I'm not a believer in hocus-pocus but some close friends

of mine tell me you're remarkable so I'll give it a shot. I need a good luck charm because my life's falling apart. Money troubles, love troubles, a recent attack of kidney stones--you name it, and if it's bad, it's happened to me within the last 6 months. I'm at my wit's end. I mean, to be writing to a sorcerer, I've got to be desperate. I hope you can fix me up.

Enclosed you will find a check for \$50 for your trouble in this regard. Please help me!

Sincerely,

Eddie Parker

I wrote back:

Dear Mr. Parker:

I can certainly appreciate your skepticism, as well as your current run of bad luck. Consequently, I have enclosed a magickal charm that will meet your needs. I have also returned

your check because I never accept money for my magick: that would generate bad karma and there's enough of that in the world, as you well know.

I will suggest, however, that you invest the \$50 in a good deed. The greater effort you put into determining the proper investment, the more you will infuse the charm with magickal force. My computer data bank tells me that there is a group home for retarded adults on Pound Ridge Road in Yakoma. Go there and find out for yourself how \$50 can best be used. Don't just hand it over to the first person who opens the door: that would diminish the force of the charm.

Here's to you and your new life, Mr. Parker!

Blessed be,

Shoki Shaula

I looked at the pile of letters on my desk: good, it was going to be a long day. I needed that.

Sweat's always good for the soul.

*

I motored downtown with a baby rabbit in my pouch. It was a grey dwarf and wouldn't ever weigh more than a couple of pounds. I had a feeling Suzette was going to love it.

I didn't anticipate a hassle.

"What do you mean she can't have it?" I said.

The horse-toothed bitch looked at me like I couldn't possibly comprehend the intricacies of human service policies and procedures. When I suggested that Suzette make the decision to keep the rabbit or not, she laughed in my face.

"Why?" I demanded. "She's not competent enough to take care of a rabbit?"

"No, that's not the issue . . ."

"She's allergic to rabbit fur?"

"Well, no . . ."

"One of the other residents is allergic, then?"

"No, that not it . . ."

"Then I fail to understand Miss . . . Miss . . ."

"Bernice Agoné," she informed me, accent grave over the e. "I'm the manager of this house . . ."

"Home, I thought," I interrupted. "Group home. No accent over the e."

"Well, of course, group home. But we are run on a program model and before anything like a rabbit can be introduced here, I have to obtain clearance from the administrative team."

"A team decision for a rabbit? And who's on this team, if I may ask?"

"Mr. uh Shaula, perhaps it would be better if I referred you to the executive director of our agency to answer your questions. He's in White Plains."

"O is he? And is he a member of the team?"

"Well, generally speaking, of course."

"And his opinion, I gather, would carry some weight regarding whether or not Suzette can have a rabbit."

"Well, he doesn't really get involved with decisions of that nature."

"Then who does?"

I could see that Bernice was getting pissed off. Good. The feeling was mutual.

"The direct care staff," she said, "for the most part. And our social services department."

"Hmmm. And what about Suzette? Is she on the team in charge of rabbits?"

"I don't appreciate your sarcasm, Mr. Shaula. Naturally, Suzette has input in all issues regarding her well-being. We encourage our clients to make choices in their lives."

"Well, that's good to hear. How about if we show Suzette the rabbit and let her make her choice. Then you can bring her input back to the team."

"That's not a good idea, Mr. Shaula. If it's decided that she can't have a rabbit, she'll only be disappointed. We don't want our clients to suffer any unnecessary distress."

"I see. It sounds to me like the rabbit issue is a foregone conclusion, team or not. Could it be that you, yourself, don't like rabbits?"

"My personal preferences aren't an issue here," she said.

"I'm sure," I said. "Good day, Miss Agoné, accent grave over the e."

*

"Moonstone," I said, "I've got a little job for you."

"Yes, Mr. Shaula?"

"I'd like you to switch a couple of brains . . ."

§

I went back the next morning with the rabbit in my pouch. The place was in an uproar.

The front door was wide open, so I walked in.

Two large black men were tugging on Suzette's bedroom door. One young white girl was on the phone to White Plains. Another stood beside the black men with an armful of charts.

From inside Suzette's bedroom came a roaring and thrashing. Walls were pounded, glass was breaking, Suzette's disjointed voice emerged in shrieks over the din.

"Maybe it's a seizure disorder," said the white girl with the charts. "She may have to medically re-evaluated."

"Suzette!" shouted one of the blacks. "Calm down! No one's going to hurt you!"

All I could make out behind Suzette's speech impediment was something like "Shit! Fuck! Piss!"

"Where's Bernice?" shouted the other black man. "She should be involved with this."

"I tried to get her," said the girl with the charts, "but all she does is sit and look at the mirror and touch her face. I can't get her to budge."

"I knew it," said the first black man. "Another breakdown, the third in five years. And what a day for it. Suzette's never been like this. C'mon Suzette! Open the door and let us help you!"

Something crashed and shattered on the inside of the bedroom door.

"Must be a full moon," the other black man said.

§

I went down to Bernice Agoné's bedroom and found her sitting, wide-eyed, in front of the mirror, touching her face. She seemed oblivious to the noise upstairs.

"Hi, Suzette," I said. "I've got something for you."

She looked at me and smiled broadly. "Shoki!" she said. She had remembered my name in spite of her evident confusion. "I draw another picture! Please!"

"No, listen, it's my turn to give you something."

And I took the bunny out of my pouch.

She didn't say a word, just held it, kissed it, and hugged it. She forgot all about waking up in a different room in a different body and just loved the hell out of that grey soft creature.

"Thank you much, Shoki," she said finally.

Then she seemed to awaken to the commotion upstairs. She cocked her ears and her eyes widened.

"I think they're going to need you to help out upstairs," I said.

Suzette stood up and ran to her bedroom. The door had been pounded off its hinges and the two men had the hysterical woman restrained between them. Suzette hurried into the room, amazed at seeing herself in such a predicament.

"Here," she said, holding the rabbit at arm's length. "For you to be happy!"

The hysterical woman took one look and fainted.

§

"You did well," I said to Moonstone. "I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, Mr. Shaula. Did the situation resolve itself to your satisfaction?"

"I think so. Suzette has her rabbit and Miss Bernice Agoné, accent grave over the e, has retired from human services. I'm somewhat chagrined that she got several commendations for her quick therapeutic judgment regarding the use of pet therapy in a crisis situation. Obviously, her sudden show of creative compassion took her colleagues very much by surprise. O well, no problem. She was too dazed to appreciate the kudos anyway, and by now she's long gone. Maybe she's left the country."

"One can only hope," said Moonstone sagely.

<\$>

2. *EPIPHANY ON 47TH STREET*

Moonstone looked at me from the mirror.

"Did you need me, Mr. Shaula?" he asked.

"No, Moonstone," I said. "I just needed to look at you awhile. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all, Mr. Shaula."

His green face planted in that mirror looked straight back at me. Then he lowered his large slanted cat's eyes and seemed to drift into a meditative state.

"What do you do," I asked, "when you're not with me?"

Moonstone looked up.

"I'm never not with you, Mr. Shaula," he said.

"I've wondered about that. I've felt your presence. I've had my suspicions. When you're with me face-to-face, I feel an overwhelming sense of concentration radiating from you. I really can't put into words what I feel coming from you. If you were human, maybe--I could possibly understand."

"I can appreciate your feelings, Mr. Shaula."

Moonstone ran a quick hand through his green hair.

"Can you?" I said. "I wonder. You seem to be such a peaceful being, a kind of consciousness that makes its home easily wherever it happens to be. You seem to be absolutely unafraid of the truth. I can say absolutely anything to you about my feelings or my ideas and, in return, I can expect you to reciprocate with honesty and respect."

"Thank you, Mr. Shaula."

"And yet you are so incredibly powerful."

I put my feet up on the desk and laughed. Moonstone just kept on looking at me.

"I've had fantasies about making use of your powers," I continued. "I can be a very brutal, self-centered man. I've had my share of frustrations and put-downs and psychic scarring. I'd be less than honest if I didn't admit that having you at my beck and call is a very tempting proposition. And dangerous."

"To whom?" Moonstone asked.

"To me, mostly. I'll have to live out the rest of my life knowing I've made a wrong choice, if that's what happens. I could do some serious damage by mistake with a guy like you running my errands."

"I suppose you could."

"And you couldn't stop me? You couldn't refuse me if I go off the deep end?"

"Those are the rules."

"See what I mean? The responsibility's 100% on my shoulders. You come into my life out of nowhere and, like it or not, I'm up to my asshole in ethical questions. I don't like that, Moonstone. My mother was an alcoholic and my father was a compulsive gambler: they didn't raise any philosophers in that house."

"I'm sorry that I can't suggest a course of action for you."

"You could leave me alone."

"I could, if that's what you want."

"You know that's not what I want. I could never want that. None of my kind could."

I stood up and paced the room. It was a little room in a rathole off 47th Street. It faced north, so there was never any sun. The back window opened onto an alley. 5 AM every morning I woke up to the chanting of the Krishnas from their gymnasium.

"Therefore, Moonstone," I said, "I'd like you to take a message --"

I took in boarders. This month it was a pigeon I named Phoenix. Phoenix lost a foot and the better part of a wing to an alley cat. By feeding him canned dog food and water, I hoped to keep him alive. So far, the treatment worked. But who could say for how long? So I wrapped Phoenix in a towel and walked him up six flights to the roof for a prognosis from Mother Theresa.

As I figured, she was already feeding her brood from the pull-cart filled with stale bread. She wore a long black dress and a white shawl over her head and shoulders. She was an ancient woman, as dry and wrinkled and dark as the crusts of bread she fed to her brood.

"Good morning, Mother," I said. "It's a beautiful morning."

"Good morning, Mr. Shaula," she said in her reedy voice. Her arms were outstretched and more than a dozen pigeons roosted on them while they digested their crusts. Hundreds of other pigeons strutted and cooed on the tarpaper, feeding and preening and lighting from roost to roost. As soon as a pigeon flew off her arm to feed, another took its place.

"I had the strangest dream last night, Mr. Shaula," she said.

"Did you?"

"Yes, it was a message from the Lord delivered by one of His angels but in your voice."

"Why, that seems most unusual, Mother. What was the message?"

"I recall it distinctly, although I don't often remember my dreams. I'm not as young as I was, you know, and my memory seems to weaken day by day."

"That's nonsense, Mother. You're ageless."

"O go on with your flattery, Mr. Shaula," she said with a laugh. Her old mouth widened like a wound amidst wrinkles. She hadn't a tooth in her mouth. "But I remember everything about this dream distinctly. An angel bent over me while I slept, an angel with flowing hair green as emeralds and green flesh and long royal robes of green, woven, it seemed, out of a living forest. Although he whispered to me most softly, the words seemed to echo in my mind as if they were shouted among the mountains of the Holy Land."

Her eyes were pale blue, made milky-grey in spots with cataracts. They grew distant and lifeless as agates as she drifted into her memories.

"And what did the angel say?" I prompted.

"O my goodness, he said that there would be great changes happening within each of us, and that we were to accept them with love and charity in our hearts, for that was the spirit in which the changes were to occur. And should we be confused or perplexed, we were to remember that at the foundation of the universe there is no confusion or perplexity, and that I was a precious stone set in that foundation. And suddenly, Mr. Shaula, all my heartaches and all my sins seemed to fall from me and I awoke and it was already morning with sunspots dancing on my bed."

"That sounds like quite a dream, Mother," I said. "I wish I had had one like that."

She looked at me strangely, more than just trying to assemble my face through her cataracts. I took the opportunity to present her with Phoenix. The wrinkles on her face flowed to her fingertips, and

she gently poked through the towel to assess the wounds. The pigeons on her arms flew to brick parapets.

"You seem to have rescued this fellow just in time," she said, seeing the pigeon more with her fingers than her eyes. "He might even fly again, though not for quite awhile. And with one good leg, he'll be strutting in no time. Do you have room amongst your menagerie to care for him?"

"I'm sure I'll find the space. It will be tight, though."

"Then, Mr. Shaula, I'd be happy to nurse him for you."

"But you have so many . . ."

"No, not now. The hurt ones are all gone. There's plenty of room."

"Well, you are a pigeon-specialist . . ."

"Then it's settled." She took Phoenix in his towel and immediately started pampering him with strokes and bread crumbs. Suddenly she stiffened, trembled, and jerked her head from side to side. "Ha-toy-yah, ha-toy-yah," she said, "I told you, said the Lord, that my kingdom will descend upon you and furnish the earth with joy and gladness."

Mother Theresa was subject to seizures and spoke in tongues. She had family in Jersey somewhere, but they found her an embarrassment and, consequently, kept her living in that tenement. The seizure apparently weakened her more than usual, more than I had ever seen. She came close to dropping Phoenix from her shaking hands.

"Are you all right, Mother?" I asked, cradling the bird in one hand and her shoulders in the other.

"I'm fine," she said. "I honestly never felt better. Too much excitement from that dream, I suppose. It's made me quite giddy."

She recovered herself and then looked me in the eye. She felt my cheek and beard with her right hand.

"Mr. Shaula," she said, "I don't mean to pry, but what are you really up to?"

§

I walked west along 47th toward the river. Joe and Eddie were sprawled out on their steam-grate, just waking up. Eddie made as if to say something to Joe but he leaned too far and fell onto Joe's shoulder. Joe growled something obscene and pushed him off roughly. Eddie checked his bottle and, finding it empty, sighed. Then he looked up and saw me.

He pointed, elbowed Joe, and tried to stand up. He fell back on the grate.

"Don't bother," I said, sitting on the grate next to him.

"Mr. Shaula," said Eddie, "you ain't gonna believe this. I had a dream with you in it last night. I mean, not you exactly, but your voice. There was this green guy like an elf or something and he spoke to me and said, 'Eddie, it's ok, it's almost time. Don't worry, you'll be ready.' That's just what he said, Mr. Shaula, I swear to God. A goddamn funny dream it was."

"Wha wha wha . . .?" Joe rolled over and shielded his eyes from the sun. He stared at me, trying to focus. "You!"

"Good morning, gentlemen," I said.

"Mr. Shaula," Joe growled, then hacked out a lung. It drifted like a pearl along the curb, carried on the street-cleaner's run-off. "Don't believe this guy. That was my dream. I must've talked in my sleep."

"You're a liar," Eddie said. "I didn't hear you say anything. I was asleep."

Joe's poxy face flushed angrily. "Then how come you told him my dream?"

"You're crazy. That was my dream. I've got enough trouble keeping track of my own dreams, I don't need to steal none from you."

"Gentlemen, let's not fight," I said. "You drink from the same bottles, I see no reason why you shouldn't dream the same dreams. The question is, therefore, what did the dream mean to you?"

"Mean?" said Joe. "How the hell should I know?"

He looked at Eddie and shrugged.

Eddie laughed. "I had fun," he said. "It was a good dream."

"Good enough to inspire you to give up the bottle?" I asked.

"Now wait a minute . . ." Joe said, sitting up with his back against the brick wall.

"Not forever," I said. "How about just for today?"

"And then what?" Eddie asked.

"Hmmm," I said. "Good question."

A passerby dropped a shiny quarter in my lap. Joe moved to grab for it then pulled his hand back, shamefaced.

"Instinct," I said. "Don't let it bother you. Here," and I handed it to him. "Don't hog it. It's for both of you."

"Yeah, well," said Joe. "We'll see."

"He's gonna keep it, Mr. Shaula," Eddie whined. "I know it. He's got that look in his face. He won't share."

"Yeah, well if he hadn't been sitting on our grate, I would've had it myself anyway."

"You've got a point, Joe," I said. I took a quarter out of my pocket and gave it to Eddie. He stashed it in his pants.

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Shaula," he said. "You're a fair guy."

"May your mother have lots of babies," Joe said bitterly, "and may they all grow into saints."

He hated it whenever I mentioned giving up the booze. Suddenly, a healthy clot of bird-shit landed on Joe's pants.

"Jesus Christ," he said, wiping at the scurvy garment with the back of his hands, "that goddamn old lady and her birds . . ."

"You know, gents," I said, standing up, "I have a feeling you're going to get into heaven in spite of yourselves. Keep on dreaming."

"You said it, Mr. Shaula," Eddie said with a smile.

"You keep on dreaming," said Joe, "and stay outta my dreams from now on."

§

"A creative approach," Moonstone said.

"Well, I know my limitations. If I declared my intentions simultaneously to everybody in the world, I'd feel honor-bound to behave myself. There's only one thing I can abide less than an impediment to my self-indulgence, and that's a personal breach of honor."

"I hope it works."

"It's too early for self-congratulations, that's for sure. What puzzles me now is the next step."

"Meaning?"

"The next step, that's all. Having access to your omnipotence without any degree of omniscience is troublesome."

Moonstone thought it over. Then he smiled and said, "Watch."

His face dissolved from the mirror, revealing in its place the steam-grate with Joe and Eddie sprawled out, drinking from a fresh bottle. Mother Theresa pulled her cart past them and suddenly

stopped. She turned and brought the cart up even with the grate. She looked down at them without saying a word. Then, from out of the cart she pulled a small box. She offered the box to Eddie.

Phoenix nestled on cotton inside the box. Eddie put down the bottle and tenderly stroked the bird's feathers.

Mother Theresa spoke to him, though I couldn't make out what she said. Eddie's eyes brightened and he stood up and pulled the cart down the street for her toward the bodega. Joe watched them walk away. His loneliness got the better of him after about five minutes and he stood up and followed them unsteadily.

Suddenly I was looking into Moonstone's face.

"You think Mother Theresa's got a couple of partners in her pigeon aid society?" I asked.

"Could be," said Moonstone. "And where that could lead, who knows?"

"Hmmm. 'From each, according to his ability, to each, according to his need,'" I quoted. "You think a few more connections were made like that today among my fellow creatures?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Moonstone. "That was a powerful dream you had me implant."

I laughed. "Moonstone," I said, "maybe that demon inside me isn't such a prick after all."

Moonstone smiled and winked.

"Attaboy," he said.

<§>

3.

DRAGON BREATHING FIRE

Moonstone showed me where he came from in the mirror. There were no lights on in my place, only a couple of candles. Two red lights appeared in the mirror, they flashed and bounced against each other in the dark, and a yellow sun bobbed up and down, bobbing into nothingness when it propelled itself into the path of the two red lights and then re-emerging, fully flaming, magnificent.

"The red lights are analogous to your planets," he said. "The yellow star is our sun. It doesn't behave the way your sun does because our laws of physics are different from your laws. Are you familiar with your sciences?"

"I have a dilettante's expertise," I admitted.

"Then just watch the system's behavior," Moonstone said. I heard his voice tucked deep inside my brain as the two red lights and the yellow star interpenetrated at right angles, behaving more like atomic nuclei than stately planets.

"I can't just explain how it works to you," Moonstone said. "Any more than you can just sit back with your feet up and tell me the nature of your universe. That job's too big for either of us. And I'm a specialist in my field."

The interaction among the planet and the sun in dark were hypnotic. That planetary system seemed to be the only system in their universe, for off in the darkness were no stars, no wheeling galaxies, no mauve and lemon nebulae giving birth to more starlight. Vaguely, very vaguely, I could see

the filmy shadows of massive dust clouds, as if the electric stuff of that universe lingered in a static melange rather than coalescing and giving birth to light and life.

All but for that one lunatic sun and two ruby planets.

*

I tried to tell Moonstone what it means to be alive in our way. All the time I'm talking to him, I don't know if he's laughing at me behind my back, befriending me, or integrating me for some interdimensional KGB where they've all the better techniques for friendly fascism.

I didn't know. I simply didn't know.

How could I know?

I told him we were very much alone. Some forms of life, like sponges and corals, I felt could communicate instantaneously among their individual living units. Human beings can't. We have to signal to each other in highly complicated ways, like body movements and language and a variety of rituals. I told him that something inside us told us that being alone was not good, that being alone hurt. And that we, as individuals, did whatever we could to avoid being alone for any considerable length of time.

He said he understood. He watched me agonizing over obscure moral issues, moaning and groaning to myself about "the greatest good for the greatest number" and "the rights of the individual", and on and on, and there was no input into my thoughts from the colony at large. No consensus or debate regarding options and alternatives and, not least, the communal willingness to both share

responsibility for the outcomes of certain decisions and the mutual absolution offered for errors committed in common.

He could see there was none of that. At best, I could call on a handful of fellow humans to share their advice. And even they, in the best of times, have unique and often unhealthy hidden agendas of their own to work out.

To be so alone in Moonstone's universe was, to him, unthinkable.

§

"Moonstone," I said, "you've shown me a universe so sterile, so limited in extent and capacity, that it's no wonder you've had to find doors into different dimensions just to have some breathing room."

Moonstone said nothing, just nodded.

"And you bring with you this incredible power. It's astounding. Could there be universes beyond or within yours that would be to you, as you are to me? Why, such intelligences would, I can only assume, control everything."

"My people assume such beings exist," Moonstone said.

"If they do, I don't want to know about them. I kind of like the illusion that I have some control over my own destiny."

"My people believe that such beings have the wisdom to control us and to permit us to believe in our own freedom of choice, simultaneously."

"Gods, then," I said, "of your people, while you are gods to the likes of us."

"If I had entered into one of your other lives, yes, you would have believed me to be an angel. In another, a force of nature, like the stars, or thunder, or the phases of the moon. In still a third, a crystal lattice changing phase. It gets complicated, the more you directly confront the multiplicity of dimensions. I have no explanation for it. I cannot comprehend its totality any more than you can inwardly see the structure of your universe, a torus both infinite and finite at the same time. A structure of four dimensions and a variety of invisible wavelengths of light. I, on the other hand, can conceive such things, can hold them concretely and solidly in my mind's eye."

Moonstone's eyes caught the humid light of the candles and flashed like twin suns. The sun and planets were gone.

"And yet I'm as overwhelmed by the intricacies of my own time and space as you," he said.

I leaned back from my desk and looked over my books and my statuettes. Artifacts from a hundred cultures graced this god-forsaken rathole in a part of town the Mafia wouldn't interfere with. My computer glowed mauve in the darkness, awaiting my next command.

And there was Moonstone looking at me from the secret depths of my mirror.

I had to be out of my mind.

"Moonstone," I said, "and the bottom line could be that everything you've told me sincerely is a metaphor for what will become for me a lifetime in Hell, mortal man breaking all the rules of mortality, and trafficking with demons or devils. How's that for another possibility in your universe of infinite dimensions?"

I leaned back and clasped my arms behind my head.

"How's that for mortal paranoia?" I said.

"In some universe," Moonstone said, "it might be true."

"Not this?"

§

"When Faust clasped Helen in his arms," I told Moonstone, "he didn't know where he was and he didn't know where he was going. All he knew was the being there, the moment, the very pure and single present that overwhelmed all his other thoughts."

Moonstone pursed his lips, drinking it all in.

"I've been there, Moonstone," I said. "I don't know about you in your universe but I've been there. O, it wasn't the stuff of literature and may not have lasted for an eternity, but it's a high-test state of consciousness all the same."

I enjoyed gloating.

"I'll bet that alone would make us the envy of several of those universes," I said. I poured myself another glass of Liebfraumilch and tilted a toast toward the mirror. Moonstone nodded graciously.

"Lucy and I weren't like that, no way," I confessed. "The sex was too good, that's all. She was kinky in all the right places. But others, Moonstone: there were others that would set your little electric heart on fire."

Moonstone smiled and twisted his favorite lock of hair.

"I'm sure," he said.

"Yes, sir," I said, leaning back and stretching, "there were some ladies--"

The thought hit me and I sat right up.

"Do you have anything like an orgasm where you come from?" I asked.

§

I brought the mirror outside so Moonstone could watch the stars. I didn't have to, but I wanted to see him watch the stars and, frankly, I felt more comfortable talking to him face to face, than hearing him just in my mind.

"That's Jupiter," I said, and pointed. We were on the roof. The mirror leaned on the wall dividing our roof from the roof of the next building. I tilted it so Moonstone could get a good look.

In Manhattan you can't see too many stars, not even with binoculars. And if you get caught with binoculars on a roof at night, you can be in big trouble, even in the unlikely event you were only watching the stars. But you can always see Jupiter. I suppose that's why he was voted the most powerful of the gods.

And Venus, too, if you can see the horizon. It's not easy for an average citizen to see the horizon from Manhattan. You have to have big bucks. But I'd walk over to the water early in the morning or just after sundown and watch Venus from the piers, or from Riverside Park, or the Highway. There's no question why she was chosen Goddess of Love and most beautiful of the goddesses by our ancestors.

Why, when she turns up when I lay out the tarot as one of the lovers or sometimes the princess of swords or even the empress, she makes the reading-table radiant and almost unbearable with her magic light.

And then there's the Moon, my special goddess.

"There's no moon tonight," I said to Moonstone, "but if there was, I'd show you more than a smiling face. There's a man carrying sticks up there, according to old Jewish legends, because he sinned and picked firewood on the Sabbath. And also, if you look at the moon a certain way, you can see the hefty profile of a lusty woman. That's my Selene, my chaste Diana with volcanic lava for blood, my rollicking patron saint."

I tilted the mirror so Moonstone could face midtown.

"When the full moon comes up over the East River, I take the binoculars and focus directly on the moon and it seems to become a huge sister globe, three planets closer and rising fast. I imagine that sister planet spins with us in orbit like dancers at Roseland, that I can almost jump up and grab the top of a mountain and pull myself up for a look around and quick hello."

A bat fluttered quickly overhead.

"Can you believe it, Moonstone?" I said. "Bats in Manhattan. They're out every night it's warm enough. They're probably descended from the bats that hunted these hills when Washington Irving rode his carriage through here or Alex Hamilton."

I sat down next to the mirror.

"It stays just cool enough up here in the summer," I said, "and gets cold as hell in the winter. Why, I once tried to walk across 123rd Street during a winter gale, and by God I couldn't make it without practically leaning parallel to the street. In spite of all the buildings, this island has some genuine weather."

"I gather you like the place," Moonstone said.

I nodded.

"This town's got its good points . . ."

§

For a shy, retiring type of person, Marianne sure like to make love next to an open window.

"Hear that?" I said.

Moonstone cocked his green ears.

"That has something to do with an orgasm," I explained. Her friend, Marty, must have just come back from six months on the road. Even the alley cats shut up to listen."

I shook my head when it was all over. "You have no idea, Moonstone," I said, "no idea at all . . ."

<§>

4.

STONED

I live in my dreams as a planet lives in its wanderings.

"How does this sound, Moonstone?" I said. "I wait for a mob of Palestinians to attack an equally unrepentant mob of Israeli soldiers and I appear above them, floating in the air, bathed in all sorts of lights and religious symbols from both Judaism and Islam. I mean, you and I can put on a show for hours, if we have to, and the cameras will cover it for all the world to see. Or, I can send a message of hope and goodwill into every tv and radio and telephone line simultaneously to give the world a miracle to chew on. And maybe I'll give them one gift, see, like clean up a major oil spill with a snap of my fingers, and then just disappear and let them figure out what happened and see if they can change their ways. On their own, of course. We must preserve free will and self-determination."

Then it struck me, what I was saying. I slumped back in my chair, suddenly depressed, and stroked my beard.

"Listen to me," I said. "I should be strangled, bigshot me talking like a god."

Moonstone looked at me from the mirror, his green elf-face non-committal. His brand of serene curiosity could get on my nerves, sometimes, and I wondered all the more if he weren't really a demon in disguise.

My dybbuk. It's said that demons are tenacious, that once they've got their claws into you, they hold on for dear life. Now, if anybody were to try and make me their golem, the slave of their every whim, he'd have to use the exact techniques of behavior modification that Moonstone appeared to

command. He was such a perfect companion for me, that I could feel myself falling in love with him, as a brother and a confidante. Now, maybe he wasn't a dybbuk, but something created of higher stuff, an angel or a Cosmic Elder in elf's clothing or Adam Cadmon fallen to earth for our redemption.

And just maybe, now, he wasn't.

Christ, he already had me tumbling head over heels in my pride. Who could help it, given such an unlooked-for opportunity to be omnipotent? I had to bite my tongue 30 times a day to keep from casting a spell here and there, just to entertain a little kid or impress an attractive woman. Yes, I must confess lust played a rather large role in my life, and my sense of recent rejection only served to keep my eyes rolling and my mind unfocused. I insisted to Moonstone that I was a dangerous man for him to be hanging around.

"Yes," he finally said, "you've had many opportunities to go overboard. Can't you, therefore, give yourself a little credit for exercising remarkable restraint?"

I thought about it awhile, and, I had to admit that what he said made sense. In spite of my innate tendencies toward grandiose mysticism, I hadn't made the royal Fuck-Up yet, I hadn't yet forfeited my soul.

If that's what Moonstone was really after.

So, I got back on the track with the points I was making, and I said, "Well, what if we appear all around the world in the sky, as if we were a UFO invasion? They'll buy that. They're primed for something like that.

"Unless . . ."

I looked closely at Moonstone.

"Maybe that's it," I said in barely a whisper, "you're one of THEM, come all the way from . . . THE FAR SIDE OF THE GALAXY."

He just blinked.

"Come on, Moonstone," I said. "Level with me. Are you an extra-terrestrial?"

"I apologize in advance," he said, "for seeming to avoid your question, but I can't define myself to you as easily as that. You need to share more experiences with me before you'll be able to understand. You may be quite right in defining me that way, and you may also be right in portraying me as a demon. A dybbuk, you call it."

He twisted a lock of hair.

"I honestly can't be sure, myself," he said.

And there I was again, blown away by his honesty. But at the same time, wasn't Satan known to the ancients as the Teller of Embarrassing Truths, the Accuser?

"Moonstone," I said finally, throwing up my hands, "I throw in the towel. I give up. I'll never make heads or tails out of you, not in a million years."

The little guy laughed. It sounded like a little bell ringing briefly in a pine forest.

"Therefore, I move that we throw caution to the winds and engineer an invasion from outer space. Flying saucers, colored lights, aliens with pointy ears, the whole ball of wax. Make them look just like you, Moonstone, and we'll do just fine."

"Don't you think that might be a little extreme for a first step?" he asked.

He had a point.

"Well," I said, "how about if we start slowly, then? How about--" and I racked my brains for a less toxic option--"how about a channeling!"

Moonstone was amused.

"Yes," I said, "I'll start off small, one simple voice as an entity from another world, a couple of visions tossed in for good measure . . . yes, I'll start with a channeling and work my way up to a cosmic invasion."

Moonstone simply smiled and shook his head.

"I can see it all now, Moonstone," I said, raising my eyes to heaven. "With the right channeler and a little imagination we can rattle the bars all around this blessed planet . . ."

§

Aleuti Breeze (née Helen Siegel, born in the Bronx) was over 50 years old and still one of the sexiest women alive. She channeled for wealthy tourists stopping over in New York for a week or so of fun and games, and some of her predictions were so startlingly accurate that she hadn't had to work a straight job for over 15 years. She started out as an actress, and what I imagine started out as something of a scam, gradually grew into a divine obsession.

That night she channeled for Mr. and Mrs. Ludwig Frazer. They were in town to see her, visit the Statue of Liberty, and catch a performance of Cats!. I entered the landscape of Aleuti's mind and saw nothing but dark clouds filling a vast sky all the way to a flat and seamless horizon.

"Aleuti!" I called out, "Tell them uh Ulalume from the Pleiades is here. Tell them I've chosen them from us from among all others to be the bearers of our message of peace, goodwill and enlightenment."

I waited a bit while she spoke. From my vantage, her voice came through like distant thunder.

"Good," I said. And I had her go on and on about the Federation of Elders and the 4th Dimension and our higher vibratory plane and stuff like that. I had the Frazers thoroughly dumbfounded.

Then I delivered the coup de grâce: a double astral vision of the emerald temples of Neptune where the great-souled prophet, Oaspe, knelt in contemplation.

I had to admit it, Moonstone and I outdid ourselves with that one.

Dressed in a flowing robe that seemed woven of comet tails, Oaspe gazed intently out of emerald fleshcrystal through two eyes like white dwarf stars. He was taller than the vastest mountain on Earth and knelt on the pinnacle-cliff of an even vaster mountain. Even I found the sheer expanse of this vision overwhelming.

Needless to say, the Frazers had something to tell their grandchildren. Over and over.

Without ever being able to truly believe it, themselves.

The next morning, however, I was torn up with "agenbite of inwit" as the Celts put it--remorse of conscience. My grandiose scheme for planetary rejuvenation, amusing as it was at first consideration and conceived with the best of intentions, started right out of the gate with one vast deception. Badly begun is half ruined, I always maintained. I'm no advocate of "end justifies the means" thinking.

I studied the bibliography on my computer monitor:

Breeze, Aleuti, My Life in Amarna.

Breeze, Aleuti, Practical Astral Projection.

Breeze, Aleuti, The Julyanne Correspondence.

Breeze, Aleuti, Twelve Steps to Low-Maintenance Chakra Health.

Etc. I could see it already:

Breeze, Aleuti, Visions of Oaspe: Journeys Through the Akashic Records. And she'd be so completely innocent of deception, which is far more than I could say of myself. She'd have her agent and three editors in attendance at her next channeling and, most probably, the video cameras would be rolling as well. And I couldn't blame her. What I had put her through was, from her point of view, incredibly startling, legitimate and worthy of publicity.

I flicked off the monitor and breathed a deep sigh. If Moonstone were a dybbuk intent upon the damnation of my soul, I couldn't have leaped more vigorously right into the middle of his game-plan.

Ego and arrogance. Haste. Lack of imagination where it counts.

The litany of my sins was just beginning, and it left a sour taste in my mouth. I grabbed my hat and stick and went for a walk.

§

Ricky Partridge worked for the meat-packers under the Riverside Drive viaduct. I intervened with Freddy Feldman, the manager, to get Ricky his job because he was severely mentally retarded and walked with a thorazine shuffle. It was difficult to make out what he was saying at times, and this led to frustration and, on occasion, violent outbursts. But Ricky loved the physical work at the packing plant, and there were few instances where any sort of challenging communication on Ricky's part was ever necessary. Besides, they liked Ricky there, and he had all sorts of co-workers taking him under their wings.

I found Ricky on the loading dock, taking his sandwich out of the bag. I just stood there, leaning against a truck until he noticed me. He smiled in his excitement, put his sandwich down carefully on the napkin, and pushed himself off the platform, running awkwardly at me with arms wide.

We hugged.

"So how's the job, Ricky?" I asked.

"Good," he said.

"I knew you could handle the heavy work."

Ricky grinned. He had no upper front teeth. They came out when he was just a kid living in an institution during one of his tirades. I could picture the aides trying to hold him down, forcing the needle into his arm, but I shook the mental image out of my mind.

"Strwong," he said, proudly.

"Yes, very strong. And big, too. And getting bigger. Hard work makes big muscles."

Ricky laughed and held up his right arm for me to feel. He didn't flex his bicep because he didn't realize that was why the wrestlers in his magazines held up their arms, but I squeezed his bicep anyway and made a big fuss.

"A tough guy, my friend," I said. "Let's ask Mr. Freddy if you've got time to take a walk."

Not many people would have given Ricky a chance, under the circumstances, and I had to give Freddy Feldman a lot of credit. He saw Ricky's potential and had the patience to roll with the punches during the early days, when Ricky dropped whatever he was doing to "fix" the truck engines or drifted away sometimes to stare across the Hudson at the seagulls and the palisades. Once, a well-meaning co-worker gave Ricky a soda as a gift, and when he wouldn't accept Ricky's money, Ricky threw a fit. When angered, Ricky would run and pull things off walls like fire extinguishers and throw them. Never at people, mind you, but through windows or glass-partitioned doors. It took three brawny packers to hold him down while Freddy had the good sense to have the inadvertently offending co-worker accept the money and get Ricky to shake hands.

"Mr. Freddy," I said, offering my hands, "how goes it this fine morning?"

Freddy, dressed in bloodstained white and wearing a white hardhat, looked up from his clipboard.

"Why, Shoki," he said, "it's good to see you. Things are going quite well, thanks."

"And has my friend here been doing a good job?"

"Of course, of course, Ricky always does a good job. He gets better at it all the time. One of my best workers."

Ricky laughed proudly, bobbing his head up and down.

"Well, does one of your best workers here have time to take a walk with an old friend?"

Ricky waited for the answer with wide eyes and a little boy's expectant pout.

"It's his lunch break," said Freddy. "I don't see why not. He can do what he wants with his lunch break."

Ricky jumped up and down, laughing.

"Ok, then, it's settled. We're off. Maybe we'll go to China, maybe to Timbuctoo, but we'll be sure to get back before lunch break's over. Right, Ricky?"

The nerve damage done by long-term thorazine usage made Ricky tremble when he was really excited. But that lasted only a moment and was lost in his long strides toward Riverside Park.

The urge to pee hit us both at the same time. Naturally, the toilets were about a mile away, but the north end of the park was generally deserted so we made our way to a copse of bushes and let fly. The two of us watering the same bush made for a uniquely bonding experience, although everything Ricky and I did together built up a special bond. We shook ourselves off, tucked ourselves in, zipped ourselves up and headed back to the park bench.

As we passed a certain bush, however, a bird started shrieking and chirping and flapping its wings. We both stopped to see what the commotion was all about.

It was a catbird, little more than a noise grey shadow gyrating the branches of a blooming forsythia. At first I thought it was tangled in something, but upon closer inspection, I saw it wasn't. The catbird kept on flapping and shrieking for no apparent reason, and each time I approached it, it leaped just out of my reach but no farther and began again to make its noise.

Ricky looked to me for an explanation with wide eyes.

Then I remembered.

"I think I know what's up, Ricky," I said. "Come back here with me and let's take a look."

Sure enough, hidden behind us in the middle of another bush, not making a sound, was the catbird's fledgling.

"See," I said, "the big bird doesn't want us to bother her baby, so she makes all the noise she can to get us to follow her and leave the baby alone."

Ricky bent over and put his big face right up against the bush to see the fledgling. Mom went hysterical and flapped and shrieked to beat the band. Ricky pointed to the baby and laughed, briefly clapping his hands.

"C'mon," I said, "the best thing to do is leave them alone."

And that's just what we did.

§

If nothing else, Ricky was a good listener. He just patiently chewed his sandwich, taking surprisingly small and delicate bites for a man so large. I had to laugh thinking about it: I received letters each day from around the country asking for my advice and services as sorcerer extraordinaire and here I was seeking solace from my agenbit of inwit from a severely retarded man eating a peanut butter sandwich.

"And that's it in a nutshell," I concluded.

Ricky nodded sagely, balled up his sandwich bag and put it in his pocket and stood up. He reached into his other pocket and, after wiping off some lint, handed me a shiny blue-green stone.

§

I had been to Aleuti's place on several occasions to talk shop. Each time she brewed me this Brazilian maté tea that packed quite a wallop. If coke freaks knew about this tea, they'd save themselves a lot of money and aggravation, not to mention their nasal membranes.

Aleuti had lost some weight since I had seen her last, and, oddly enough, this hadn't enhanced her sex appeal. She looked drawn, a bit haggard and out of sync with her vital energies. For the first time, in fact, she struck me as if she were getting old.

"Something momentous happened to me last night," she said, putting down her tea cup and leaning toward me confidentially across the table. "I had a remarkable vision while channeling for this couple from out of town."

"I should think you've grown accustomed to remarkable visions by now, Aleuti," I said.

"This was different," she said. Her voice dropped down to a whisper. "I think I've finally broken through the final barrier and entered the highest realms of dimensional existence."

Poor Aleuti. My bowels iced up with the prospect that I would soon be shattering her illusions and breaking her heart.

I took a deep breath. "Or," I said.

"Or what?" she asked, her grey eyes narrowing.

"Or the darker spirits have broken through to you."

"What do you mean?" She seemed very tense, very uneasy.

I held the blue-green stone out to her in the palm of my hand. "The stone's called ulalume," I said, and she drew back, gasping. "It protects its owner from the demon, Oaspe. Only the most powerful mediums ever encounter Oaspe and, since I'm not in that league, I figured I'd pass the stone

on to you. The stone sets up this vibration, see, that attracts darker entities directly to it, rather than leaving them free to plague vulnerable humans. O, I'm sure it's not infallible, but it helps."

Aleuti sat back and took a long sip of tea. Rather than being disappointed, she seemed relieved. Five years washed away from her face while I watched. Her marvelous figure, draped in ethereal bronze fabric, emanated powerful sexual energies. She smiled warmly at me.

"Wherever did you get this marvelous stone?" she asked, her fingertips gently stroking its polished surface.

"O, a very special friend gave it to me," I said. "He told me I'd know how to put it to its best use."

I leaned forward and stared at her right in the eyes. "You think I've succeeded?" I asked her point-blank.

"Absolutely," she said in her huskiest voice.

<\$>

5.

GHOSTS AND BONES

The new moon, Rosh Hodesh, gets me down. There are several baruchas I should be saying, but I never do. I should be up on the roof lighting candles, but it's too damn cold.

I'm very much a child of the moon. When Moonstone entered my life and asked me to name him, I just said the name Moonstone without a moment's hesitation. The name simply spilled out of my mouth. I don't understand my affinity for the moon, but I'm told I'm not unique. My intuitive powers grow immensely strong as the moon grows full, and on the night the moon is full, I'm invincible. Conversely, the new moon finds me limp and at odds with myself. I'm my own worst enemy when the moon is new.

So, figuring I'd need a spiritual bodyguard on a night that was both Rosh Hodesh and Mardi Gras, I set the mirror on its stand and waited for the little munchkin to appear.

First, my own face caught my attention. Usually, I ignore my own face in a mirror, looking immediately beyond my face, waiting for Moonstone to show up. But that night I looked at my own face. I took careful note of the new wrinkles around my eyes, my hair growing longer and wilder than I'd been accustomed, of late, to keep it. Then, underlit by a candle, my face flickered into a thousand variations of itself, young and old, wise and stupid, cunning and naive. I watched a thousand incarnations of my soul in that mirror, and only after my reflection sort of shimmered back into my current, stable self, did Moonstone choose to appear.

Randy held the green Martian and Emily held Yoda.

"Ok, now. You ready?" I said.

They looked up at me with the widest eyes, full of wonder and an anxious waiting for a billion wisdoms, and nodded yes.

I looked around quickly to make sure no one was watching. Then I dramatically held forth my pointed finger and the Martian and Yoda floated out of their little hands and danced like marionettes on invisible strings in midair. The kids gasped and couldn't keep from laughing.

"Shoki! Shoki!" Emily said, hopping off the chair and bouncing up and down on her toes as if she had to go to the bathroom, "They're dancing, Shoki! It's magic!"

"Magic," said Randy, and he laughed and flapped his hands, staring at the little plastic figures dance.

"You're absolutely right," I said, making them twirl and dive and pirouette with the slightest motion of my fingertip, "it's magic."

Then I gestured the toys to slow down. Emily took her Yoda and Randy took the green Martian out of midair.

"And, on top of that, it's our secret," I said. I looked them straight in the eye and both of them stuck out their lower lips and nodded solemnly. "If your mother finds out I make your toys float, she'll lock me out in the snow!"

The kids laughed and I tickled them. Their mother was my sister, Lily.

Ah, Lily!

§

"Lily," I said, "you're a great cook."

"Still?" she said. "I'm too tired to be a great cook, if you ask me. You're just hungry. But thanks for the vote of confidence."

I watched Lily smuggle a load of dishes into her kitchen. I motioned to the kids to follow me and I lifted all 90 pounds of my sister off the floor and set her protesting in her favorite chair where she worked her needlepoint, much to the delight of the kids.

"We're doing the dishes, Lily," I said. "You take a break."

"Pick mom up again," said Randy, "and carry her someplace, Uncle Shoki."

"Don't you dare!" Lily yelled, laughing.

"Yes, yes, do it, Uncle Shoki!" little Emily hollered. "Make mommie fly around the room!"

"Uh, let's get the dishes done, gang," I said. "We'll make them fly around the room, instead, and leave your mother in peace for awhile."

Lily bowed to the inevitable and let us have our time in the kitchen. All she heard was laughter, the clatter of silverware and running water. She never saw the water on the walls and floor because the three of us had the good sense to mop up our shenanigans before we closed up shop. When I emerged from the kitchen I had one child hanging by a foot from each hand.

"What cabinet do these go in?" I asked Lily.

Lily thought it over while the kids laughed and squealed for me to put them down.

"How about the bedroom cabinets with the mattresses on them?" she said finally.

"Fair enough," I said.

"No, no, mom, we don't want to go to bed, not yet...!"

But their pleas fell on deaf ears. Their mother's word was law, as far as I was concerned, so I bounced them on their little beds, played with them while they changed into their pajamas, tucked them in, and told them stories about green elves with big eyes. Then Lily came in, kissed them, and turned out the light.

§

Lily looked at the check then looked at me.

"That's very generous," she said. "Where did you get the money?"

"C'mon, Lily," I said, "you know I run a worldwide cocaine distribution cartel from my apartment. I just skimmed a little off the profits."

"Very funny," she said. "Shoki, I worry about you. You barely make enough money from your writing to pay your rent."

"Thank God I'm still under rent control."

"And you give everything else away. At least if you're going to read tarot cards or tell fortunes, charge money for it."

"Now, I told you Lily, that's bad karma."

"And what sort of karma's behind this check?"

Lily's a proud woman. Two kids, no husband, a dip job in a bank, and she was fighting me to the bitter end.

"Look," I said, "I'll tell you what I told the kids. I have a Martian friend who's very mechanically inclined. He makes bank computers issue me checks in the mail for no reason. A check here, a check there. It's all perfectly legal, as long as you've got a Martian to manage the books."

"Shoki, you're hopeless."

"Yeah, but I love you anyway."

Hugging Lily was like hugging a warm toy, she was so little. It was hard to fathom how we could have shared the same parents.

"Really, hon," I said, "I had an exceptional week. Take the money and squander it foolishly."

"I'll pay my bills with it, thank you," she said.

Her face had begun to bear the patina of middle age. Loneliness made her rush into a doomed marriage and now, two kids and no husband later, I envisioned her slight form shrivelling ever more swiftly, like a peeled apple left on a sunny windowsill.

"You're not gambling, are you?" she asked.

"Lily, you know Dad's blood doesn't run that thickly in my veins. I don't even buy lottery tickets. Well, actually, I bought one once and won three bucks, which I promptly cashed into tokens for a Times Square peep show. And you know what? The first quarter made the machine malfunction and the movie kept running, over and over, without having to put in any more quarters. I left the booth numb and nauseous. My passion for kinky sex was gone for weeks. Can you imagine? That's the entire history of my compulsive gambling."

Still, Lily was apprehensive. She said I had Dad's charm, good looks and his gift of gab, and she was just waiting for some of his less positive attributes to blossom and ruin my life.

"And that's why you never ever drank a glass of wine, isn't it?" I said.

She said nothing.

"Lily," I said, "we've got to let go of them. They were fucked up and, in the turmoil of their being fucked up, they made us fucked up for awhile. They made us choose up sides and become adversaries for no goddamn reason, just because we were there and we were little kids and had no defenses. But we survived. It's over and we can't go on living with their ghosts and bones hanging in our closets."

I put on my hat, grabbed my stick and kissed Lily goodnight.

"We've been through a lot, you and I," I said. "The dues are paid and life goes on. I'll see you next week. Maybe I'll take the three of you out to O'Neal's Balloon for burgers and nachos."

"The kids will love that," she said.

"Then it's a date! Now, I'm off."

I gave her a hug and a kiss and hurled myself out into the Broadway snow.

§

"Let's see now," I said to Moonstone, reading from the computer monitor, "there's the Aleph of the Kabbalists, the mirror of Iskander Zu al-Karnayn, the sevenfold cup of Kai Kosru, the mirror that Tariq ibn-Ziyad found in a tower, the mirror that Lucian of Samosata found on the moon, the mirrored spear of Jupiter, Merlin's mirror, and the stone pillar at the mosque of Amr in Cairo. Have I left anything out?"

Moonstone just smiled.

"Ok, ok, don't tell me," I said. "I suppose this is all part of the test. But I'll venture to say I'm not the first Earthling who's had the pleasure of finding your face in his mirror. Am I right?"

Moonstone nodded his head from side to side, rather dubiously, twisting a lock of green hair. "I suppose so," he said.

"Aha. Now we're getting somewhere."

Then a thought struck me.

"You didn't by chance live for awhile with ol' Solomon the Great, did you? And did he call you 'Asmodeus' perhaps? And did he, like me, send you out on a variety of errands?"

Moonstone smiled mischievously.

"You're getting warm," he said.

From my discussions with Moonstone, I gathered it was both a curse and a blessing that each human being was inevitably trapped in the solitude of his own skull. Among Moonstone's ilk, this is apparently not so. We are cursed in that so much that drives us to act as we do is done out of loneliness, out of our need to force other people to break through our mutual barriers and be our kin. The Klansman wears his white sheet and the religious hermit wears his simple rags in the shared effort to be less alone. We are blessed in that our solitude enables us to keep our darker and shameful natures hidden and private while we wage our battles secretly to rise above whatever quirks have been planted in us and make ourselves whole in our own time and own way.

Thanks to Moonstone, I sat in Lily's skull and watched her thoughts and feelings pass before me as jagged shards of light. Much of the light was intensely beautiful, full of sparks and colors like a firework chrysanthemum. But there were many places where the light was harsh and cold, cracked and broken like foul lightning, its brightness bringing as much shadow in its train as light.

I allowed myself to drift to that part of Lily's inner landscape where the shadows were starkest and the light most painful to behold. There, in the midst of convoluted light and darkness and slashed as if by a thousand daggers in each shifting beam, stood the phantom of our father.

Its eyes could not fix themselves straight on mine, as they never could on Lily's, always twisting out of her clear gaze like a fish trying to shake free from the hook in its jaw. I stared at the phantom in stark horror.

Then I recognized the voice in my mind. It was the husky, imperious voice of our mother:

"He hates us, Lily. We are women. He had daughters before you, a wife before me, and he hated them, too, Lily. He drove himself out of their lives, left none of them with any part of him, and

he's done that to us, too. All because we are women. That is our crime. That is why we must be punished. We are a reproach to him just by our very existence. He blames us for his lust, and he blames us for burdening him with unpleasant responsibilities, and he blames us for all that he finds inadequate within himself, as if, had there been no women in the world, he could have easily been whatever he most wanted to be: a warrior, a philosopher, a man footloose and free walking an endless road. He hated you long before you were ever born, Lily, just as he hated me from the moment he first wanted to thrust his body into mine. And he died still hating you, Lily, just as he died hating me. . . "

My heart shattered at the horror of those words and that denigrate voice. I tried to pin the phantom's eyes with mine, but without success. I grew angry.

"MOONSTONE, ENOUGH: WE'VE GOT TO CHANGE THAT TAPE."

§

I came out of the trance with tears streaming down my cheeks and my chest heaving so badly I couldn't speak. Moonstone waited patiently for me to calm down.

"Yes, Moonstone," I said at last, "we humans simply couldn't handle doing that on a daily basis. It would kill us."

"You would adapt," Moonstone said. "Your species is very resilient."

"Half-truths," I said. "Nothing Lily heard from our mother was without reason. Still, the impression she carried within her since she was a little girl was filtered through a dysfunctional medium."

Moonstone thought awhile, scratching his nose.

"That's true with all humans," he said finally. "Each of you carries one side of many stories deep inside. I suppose that's what makes you so interesting."

I wiped the last of the wet from my eyes and sighed.

"Is that a fact?" I said.

§

It was Lily on the phone. She sounded excited and eager about something, but I could also tell she had been crying.

"Lily, what's the matter?" I said.

"I just had the most wonderful dream, Shoki. I had to call and tell you about it. You don't mind me waking you up, do you?"

"Hell, no. I wasn't asleep anyway. I just got back in from uh visiting someone."

"I'm not surprised. There isn't a woman in this city that's safe with you around."

"Now, now. Don't be too harsh. I figure I'm just working through my insecurities. Now, tell me about your dream."

"O Shoki," she said, sounding all excited, "I saw Dad in my dream. I haven't dreamt about him in years and, when I did, the dreams were sad dreams, so sad I hated them. I considered them nightmares. But tonight he came to me in my dream and looked me straight in the eye, smiling. You remember how light blue his eyes were, like buttons of sky set into his head? I felt like a little girl again, held immobile

by his beautiful eyes while he taught me a spelling lesson or the few phrases he knew in French, or the words to one of those old songs he loved. I was enthralled."

She paused. I could tell she was finding it hard to speak.

"It sounds like a great dream so far," I said, filling in the silence.

She took a deep breath and started fresh.

"You know what Dad said to me? He said, 'Lily, from the moment I first held you in my arms after you were born, I knew you were the most special woman in my life.' Can you imagine that, Shoki? Then he said, 'But I was too old and sick in body and spirit when you were born to be able to be a proper father to you. You gave me every bit of love you had in you, but I was like a soaked sponge, I couldn't absorb what you had to give. I'm sorry for that, Lily,' he said, and then he reached his arms out to me and I felt him hug me just like I'd been wide awake. Then he said, 'Lily, there are many lives yet for us to live, and in each one I promise I'm going to be there for you, and love you over and over again with the best love a father can offer, and I promise I'm going to make up for everything I couldn't do or say this last time around.' And, God, Shoki, he asked me if that was ok with me and what could I say but yes, yes, yes . . ."

Lily couldn't talk awhile for crying, and I must admit I wasn't much help, either. Finally, she said, "Listen, can you meet me later this afternoon for coffee? It's my treat."

"Your treat?" I said, sniffing. "How can I pass that up."

"Ok, then. This afternoon at Chockful, 3:30. I'll bring the kids. You don't mind, do you?"

"Hell, no. I've got a big lap that's just aching for their little behinds."

"Then I'll hang up now and let you get some sleep."

"Tomorrow, then."

"Shoki?"

"Yes?"

"It's going to be a beautiful day. I can feel it already."

<§>

6. *THE SHRINE*

Her name was Betty Bacchante and she deserved it. She had big wild eyes that always laughed, even in bad light, and a double handful of breast that turned me into the docile and innocent suckling I once was. I held her in bed with both hands latched onto her, and we watched a full moon rise over the shinto shrine.

"So what brings you out of the city to this backwater?" she asked.

"I needed someone sane to talk to," I said.

Betty laughed.

"I think you came to the wrong place," she said. "Look around. Sanity isn't allowed in this place."

I looked around. She had snatches of Gertrude Stein operas pinned on the walls, and a Durer print of the Knight meeting the Devil, and a poster of Waterhouse's La Bell Dame Sans Merci. Then there was her witch's altar with a statuette of Aphrodite floating on a shell, and a crystal pendant hanging down from her mirror. Betty didn't ever have any money, and most of her place was pretty decrepit and sparse, like one would imagine a hermit's cell to be: a couple of books here and there, a hotplate, an old toaster with bread crumbs still stuck to the slots. In the back yard stood the wooden tower built on a whim by the old man she rented from, who, in order to dodge taxes, had the tower sanctified as a shinto shrine.

I rolled back over her and stuck myself inside where it was wet and tight. Again, she laughed.

"Ok," I said, "so I came to the wrong place. Let's fuck some more, then."

And we did. Over and over until I had nothing left inside me to come out. Then we laid back holding each other and watched the full moon rise over the tip of the shrine.

"Does he ever do anything religious in it?" I asked.

"O, he goes up into it all the time, whenever he gets the chance. He brings a book and a couple of cigars and just sits on the floor with his head leaning against that little window at the top."

I looked out of her window.

"Aha!" I said. "I see it all, now. He pervs through your window!"

"Well, I caught him at that a couple of times but I talked to him about it. I said, 'Look, Benny, you can see the whole thing up close for the right price. Now come up with the bucks and I'm all yours for 30 minutes. Otherwise, keep your eyes pinned on outer space.'"

"Did that work?"

"I never caught him at it again. Otherwise, what I don't know won't hurt me."

She settled back in my arms. "So why did you come up here, Shoki?"

"Betty, I'm going crazy. I've become delusional. I'll tell you about it sometime, but first I want to tell you a story."

I told her Wilde's story about the selfish giant and how he learned to love the Christ child. She was in tears by the end of it and I was pretty moved, myself, so we hugged and fucked one more time. That was it. I had to sleep.

"So what sort of delusions are you having?" she asked quietly.

I sighed. I could tell she wasn't going to let up, so I told her all about Moonstone, about how he appeared one night in my special scrying-mirror and proceeded to drive me crazy. Betty was my Priestess. We didn't see each other often, but when we did it counted for something. She didn't interrupt me, she didn't have any snide or cynical remarks to make, she just lay there and listened.

"Have you ever thought about going to Atlantic City with this Moonstone?" she said finally.
"You could do a lot of good with the money you'd make."

Sometimes I think my life should be accompanied by a soundtrack of plucked guitar strings. The way Betty looked away from me and up at the moon, the depth of thought she bore in her large eyes: I felt that moment deserved accompaniment by invisible guitars, or possibly lutes, plucked by equally invisible angels.

So, Betty and I violated numerous state sodomy statutes that night, and by God the etheric force of our union made I could swear the moon's disk wink and smile. For a moment I thought it was a laughing Chinaman and that I had finally gone raving mad. Betty's face was stuffed into her pillow and she was groaning, so she saw nothing.

§

Then one afternoon I met an old chinaman named Ling Wu.

We were exploring the woods and I had just finished tying Betty naked and spreadeagled to a log lodge constructed by state foresters for the convenience of hikers. Once she was helpless I would begin to slowly tickle her all over her body. Done right, this sort of activity turned out to be, for us, a rousing prelude to ultimate coital consummation.

After she fell asleep in my arms in the sleeping bag, I saw Ling Wu leap from one hillcrest to another. It was the second night of the full moon and I distinctly saw his shadow arc and pass above the evergreens to float still and perfect, even if only for a moment, smack in the middle of the moon's laughing face. Then the robed shadow descended and blended into the darkness of the evergreens on the opposite hillcrest, about a quarter of a mile through space all told.

I didn't know he was Ling Wu at the time. It wasn't until I started asking around in town that I learned anything about my apparition. At first, I thought it was a UFO but one that was a shadow instead of a light. Then the old ladies in town told me the legends then current regarding the mysterious chinaman, Ling Wu.

About 150 years before, Ling Wu brought his young wife with him to America and they settled in Tolbrook by the Lake Zoar mountains. The mountain laurels, dark green as earth's blood, and the twisted old spruce trees suspended above steep cliffs reminded Ling Wu of his home district. After he built a cedar cabin for the two of them on a steep ledge, they settled into the life and rhythm of the lake and its environs, becoming over time as much an integral part of that life and rhythm as the Canadian geese and the mallard ducks and the otters. Ling Wu had built the cabin in such a way as to make it appear to have thrown down roots through the naked cliffstone and to have become a most ancient and revered lifeform in its own right. Always being of a mystical temperament and predisposition, Ling Wu decided to dedicate his life to obtaining a state of acute oneness with his God. He hoped that his companion, with all her vivacity and enthusiasm and sense of mission, would become, after all, a full partner in his trials to surmount the natural order of separation and illusion and attain transcendence.

This was not to be, however. She quickly grew tired of their hardship and isolation and, the legend goes on, she left Ling Wu without a word of warning or explanation for a new life in a big city with a wealthy Chinese entrepreneur whose path had crossed hers by chance on one of her rare solitary visits to the Tolbrook general store. Of course, there was speculation after the fact that the entrepreneur, with his ostentatious wealth and mask-like face, was in league with the Devil, and that there was nothing at all fortuitous about their meeting.

Apparently, Ling Wu accepted his bride's disappearance as he accepted the southward flight of geese in the winter, a natural transition from one frame of reference to another, driven by inner longings which could in no other way be reconciled. His ways changed, however. He began wandering ever farther away from his simple cabin, dressed in stiff leather and pelts he cured himself. His travels, initially a matter of at most a few miles, became long, slow peregrinations along mountain trails through untrod forests that covered portions of three states and continued for hundreds of miles. Occasionally he would appear on the main thoroughfare of small valley towns and make his way slowly through the community, saying nothing, approaching no one, but seemingly ascertaining for himself the state of civilization in general before returning to the solitude of caves and forests. As the years passed, Ling Wu's travels became as regular as clockwork, and often housewives, taking pity on the silent Chinaman, would leave pies and breads for him on their windowsills to be taken by him in silence and anonymity in order to alleviate what they knew to be a singularly hard life.

Then Ling Wu stopped appearing in towns at all and, in time, he was given up for dead. That is, until sometime in the spring of 1916, over 20 years after the Chinaman was thought dead, when several boys on a Lake Zoar fishing expedition saw a strange figure dressed in rough leather by the shore of the lake with a bird on his shoulder, a bird with plumage all the colors of the rainbow. It was a Chinaman, they insisted, with long, wild hair and beard, and he apparently talked to the bird in his singsong language and gestured at their canoe and laughed all the while. Then, after the boys had in their terror at the strangeness of the man taken a good long look, the figure with his bird vanished before their eyes.

All sorts of wild tales about Ling Wu swept the mountains and valleys, all the way from Tolbrook and McClellan Heights to the far reaches of Rhode Island and the Hudson River terminus. Rumors spread that during all his years of wandering, Ling Wu had been taunted by the same devil that stole his

bride and that finally, having gone mad, he tried to beat the devil at his own game by delving into wickedness and the black arts. It was said that the rainbow bird was his demonic familiar and that he had learned through the tutelage of demons how to conquer death and to gain knowledge of people's most intimate yearnings. Reports leaked out that Ling Wu began appearing in people's dreams offering the dreamers limitless power and dominion over all the nations of the earth, if they would willingly enter with him into the in-between world of dream-existence. Naturally, given the ineluctable progress of gossip and hearsay, the community elders who had no such dreams, dismissed them as the products of superstitious fear among country bumpkins with overactive imaginations.

Apparitions of Ling Wu occur in Tolbrook with about the same frequency as UFO sightings. Ah, a strange place that Lake Zoar and its environs, a place of mysterious energies and presences, where the very air has a crisp taste of magick in it. Betty felt it strongly and that's what drew her to the place and kept her living there, not really liking the slow process of throwing down roots and limiting her access to the stimulation of mankind's worldlier haunts, but remaining there nonetheless, much to her own consternation and odd pleasure.

She drove her pick-up into Tolbrook, leaving me to do as I would. I chose to hike among the back hills. Some hours into my hike I came upon a wooded rise from which I could make out the sunglow of Lake Zoar far below. Several yards away a small cave opened into a jagged palisade.

In front of the cave sat a Chinaman with wild eyes all dressed in leather and pelts. He had a rainbow-colored bird on his shoulder and the two of them seemed to be sharing some whispered confidences. The Chinaman looked up at me and started laughing in the most amused and friendly manner. He beckoned to me with a bony finger but, as I started to approach him, both he and the bird vanished without a trace.

Betty Bacchante laid out the tarot cards and found me very much the Fool.

"I can accept that," I said. "I've always admired the Fool's mercurial qualities, his mystical inclinations and his unwillingness to be any one thing for any great length of time."

"Shoki," she said, "you always look on the bright side. It's often the case that the Fool has a great deal of difficulty meeting the mundane demands placed on him by the real world."

"I'll accept that, too," I said. "I may find life fun, but I've never found it easy. If that sounds like a contradiction, so be it. Now I have a bit of a mystery to share with you: I saw Ling Wu today."

"What!" Betty was quite startled. "Where?"

"Way back in the hills. He sat in front of a cave with a rainbow bird on his shoulder and gestured for me to come to him. I started to, then he broke out laughing and disappeared."

"The bird too?"

"The bird too."

She shook her head. "You know," she said, "whenever I lay another bill in my 'to-be-paid-as-soon-as-I-have-some-money' box, I promise myself that I won't get swept up anymore by all that mystical crap I have such a weakness for. And now you come along and tell me you've had a vision of Ling Wu within walking distance of my house. It's not fair, Shoki. I'll never grow up to be an upright and stable taxpaying citizen."

I raised my wineglass.

"I'll drink to that," I said.

She gathered up her cards and raised her glass in return, sighing deeply.

§

"Moonstone," I said, "come out, come out, wherever you are. . ."

His green, big-eyed face blossomed in the mirror, smiling.

"I thought you were on vacation," he said. "You said you needed a break from me, Mr. Shaula."

"Now, now, don't make it sound so personal. After three months of non-stop subliminal politicking among the inner landscapes of some of the world's worst scoundrels, cutthroats and all-around assholes called 'politicians', I simply needed a break, that's all. Look, Moonstone, I'm no saint. I hadn't been with a woman all that time. O, the sacrifices one must make in order to save the world. My friend, Ms. Bacchante, has taken up in good measure some of that slack in my life."

"I'm pleased to hear it, Mr. Shaula."

"Ah yes, Moonstone, my friend has unimaginable talents in that regard and has exercised them unstintingly in my behalf. But that's not why I called you. I think I met one of your friends, recently."

Moonstone's eyes widened.

"That would be most strange, if it were true," he said.

"Have you ever heard of a gentleman by the name of Ling Wu?"

Moonstone grinned broadly. "He keeps a bird with him, a bird with multi-colored plumage?"

"Every color of the rainbow."

"Yes, we've had dealings, he and I."

"I thought so. Now, was it just coincidence that I happened to run into him on this vacation, or have I been shall I say maneuvered into bumping into him? I'll tell you right up front I don't like being maneuvered."

Moonstone sighed.

"Mr. Shaula," he said, "now you're the one taking things personally. We are all maneuvered in one way or another by higher powers. You, Ling Wu, I -- all of us. The important questions are who is doing the maneuvering, and why."

"Well, my green friend, I'd like an answer to those questions, if you don't mind."

Once again I felt my soul cracking inside me, dropping me into a grand funk. I didn't think it was being paranoid, under the circumstances, to be vigilant against being a satanic dupe. I had learned to feel deep within me a friendship for that bright and mysterious being who lived in the special mirror. Now, once again, the short hairs on the back of my neck stood taut and my bowels churned thinking that Moonstone, indeed, was dealing me hands from a stacked deck. But I politely said nothing, waiting for him to explain himself first.

Moonstone twisted a lock of green hair and seemed genuinely troubled that he choose the right words. "You must understand," he said, "that I'm not just some genie in a bottle. There are parameters established by powers higher than either of us which allow me some degree of latitude and initiative.

Yes, I know Ling Wu and felt that he was an intriguing enough spirit to stimulate you if you made his acquaintance."

"But I travelled to Lake Zoar to see Betty Bacchante, not Ling Wu!"

Moonstone paused and cleared his throat.

"Why do you think Miss Bacchante moved to Lake Zoar in the first place?"

I was stunned.

"Miss Bacchante and I go way back," I said. "She moved out of New York years ago. Moonstone, I don't think I'm going to like the answer to this question but, mad as Oedipus, I'll ask it anyway: how long have you been involving yourself in my life?"

Moonstone sighed and shrugged.

"You're right, Mr. Shaula," he said. "You're not going to like the answer . . ."

§

The rainbow bird strutted and danced on Ling Wu's finger. It spread its wings and stiffened its bright feathers and stuck out a worm-like tongue and hissed. It strutted back and forth, swaying in rhythm to a soundless music, then squeaked and chirped. Ling Wu couldn't contain his joy in his companion and laughed heartily at each new antic.

I had to admit the bird was amazing--but so was Ling Wu. He put the bird on his shoulder and then, capturing my attention with gestures much like a side-show magician, he hurled colorful balls of light apparently from out of his leather sleeves, or else from out of nowhere, and they floated above our

heads in front of Ling Wu's cave in the precise orbital sequence and disposition of our nine planets with a blazing bright sun in the middle. Then he roared with laughter, his eyes and beard and long black hair wild with energy, and shot bolts of rainbow lightning from his fingertips toward the rising moon. He spoke no English so, instead, mugged and mimed for my edification and enjoyment, widening his eyes impossibly wide while projecting from beneath his leather and pelt jacket a bright spinning orb of light which emitted a long electronic drone far into the starry sky. I understood instantly why Tolbrook and the Lake Zoar environs had become over the years the UFO capital of the world.

Ling Wu turned to me and said, "Ji?"

I had no idea how to respond. "I'm impressed," I said at last. "You put on quite a show."

Then he said, "Gei?"

"Uh, no I'm not," I said, "but some of my best friends. . ."

"Wei. Wu-wei? Wu-wei?"

"Listen," I said, "this is getting us nowhere. At least your friend, Moonstone, speaks my lingo. I have no idea what you want me to tell you."

Ling Wu fairly roared with laughter, rocking back and forth where he sat crosslegged in front of his cave. He produced a stone carafe which, upon closer inspection, contained some kind of pungent, clear wine.

"Well," I said, "now you're talking."

We passed the bottle back and forth and it was like nothing I'd ever drunk before. It was smooth going down, redolent of fruity sweet vapors, and quickly went to my head. There were suddenly three Ling Wus, then ten, then a whole football stadium full of them.

"Moonstone!" they shouted, as if cheering the winning goal at the Superbowl.

"Moonstone!" I shouted back, "Moonstone! Moonstone!! Moonstone!!!"

Then I rolled onto my back on the cool grass and felt myself falling giddily, slowly, inexorably, up into the sky and down into the earth.

§

After splintering my subconscious on Ling Wu's wine, I needed Moonstone to help me figure a few things out.

Betty went with a few friends to the movies. I declined the offer, but I took her aside before she left and said, "Remember, when you get back I'm going to be real horny. I won't be responsible for my actions."

She nuzzled up to me and elbowed my ribs. "Do your worst," she said. "I'm counting on it."

After they left, I retrieved the mirror from my backpack.

"Moonstone," I said, "you and that Ling Wu operate in completely different ways, but in a strange sense you're very much alike."

"I consider that a compliment," he said.

"Now tell me: did Ling Wu make a pact with the Devil to get back his wife or did he only want to feel no pain over her loss?"

Moonstone smiled mysteriously. In the candlelight he, for a brief moment, looked very feminine and alluring.

"The only pact Ling Wu ever made was with me," he said.

"That's not a comforting answer," I said. "And just when we were beginning to get along."

"Ling Wu wanted to learn from someone, and I was chosen. The pact was that I would teach and he would learn. That's all of it. We fulfilled it to the letter. Then we went our separate ways."

"He strikes me as the quintessential Taoist priest: a magician, full of paradox, laughter and silence."

"He's a remarkable creation. You would be well-advised to keep his image clear in your memory."

"No quarrel there," I said hurriedly. "He's not someone a guy can easily forget. And he took me on this trip, I didn't know where the hell I was . . . and I came back with a sense of having made peace with myself, my family, my failures and my aspirations. By reason of preserving your sanity I won't go into all the details right now but something inside me cracked and was crushed and purified, then restored to me. It's the strangest sensation. . . ."

"Pleasurable?"

"Very. Much more so than the euphoria of the wine he shared with me."

Moonstone laughed.

"Yes, Ling Wu's wine: a remarkable drink," he said.

"You've tried it?"

"I taught him how to ferment it." Moonstone winked at me. "It's an old family recipe."

§

I felt duty-bound to show Betty the cave. After all, I was her guest and the apparition had appeared, relatively speaking, right in her back yard. It wasn't much to look at in broad daylight without Ling Wu sitting in front of it: a rift among boulders, basically, which defied my claustrophobia to explore it. Betty, however, wanted to go in.

"Be my guest," I said. "I'll wait outside, if you don't mind. I really don't have the stomach for darkness and tight places."

She wanted to say something to me, but I sat on the ground and looked out toward Lake Zoar. Then, without a word, she crawled into the cave's entrance as far as the length of her body and abruptly crawled back out. She sat on the ground next to me, to my left.

"It's very dark in there," she said, "and probably swarming with bats. I don't like bats."

"I can understand that," I said, smiling, but not looking at her. I kept my eyes pinned to the distant sliver of lake seen through the new foliage, my thoughts clearly rampant on the issue of Moonstone's relationship to Ling Wu, Betty Bacchante, and me. Aristotle maintained that genius was the ability to see relationships, and, that being the case, my genius was sorely taxed trying to make

sense of a life currently lived from one astonishment to the next. At one point I remember thinking to myself, What can possibly remain in this life to astonish me?

Then I became aware that, seated on my right, was Ling Wu. I lurched with the shock and the hermit-priest laughed. His bird swayed, left to right, on his shoulder.

I turned to my left to make Betty aware of his presence but, seated casually in Betty's place, was my deceased old man, Alexander Shaula.

My old man, Alexander Shaula, son of Isadore Elliott Shaula, grandson of Rabbi Hananya Shaula of Lublin who emigrated to the United States just before the Civil War and had the hard luck to live on the wrong side of the Mason-Dixon line and who lost an infant to a Yankee cannonball, was born in 1900, exactly, although he wanted the world to think he was five years younger. His passion was gambling and fast women, women like my mom. He was over 50 when I was born and needed me like he needed a second asshole. Still, he never let on that was how he felt and always showed me tenderness and love--when he wasn't at the track, or on a junket to Vegas, or making money to pay back the mob.

"So," he said, "you look well."

My vocal apparatus rebelled: I said nothing.

"Well," he continued, smiling, "I don't have much time so I can't wait for this father-son dialogue to evolve: I'll get right to the point: you've had Satan very much on your mind. Good. Beware the foul fiend, Flippertigibbet. Keep in mind, however, that when people gather in a sabbat to cool their lust, and only for form's sake bestow the nether kiss on Satan, there's still hope. When they gather,

however, primarily to bestow the kiss and with their sexual appetite a vague afterthought, then there is no hope. Whoop! I'm outta here!"

With that my father leaped to his feet and back-flipped head over heels into the cave. In his place Betty sat on the ground, lost in thought.

I grabbed her by the shoulders. "Look," I said, pointing to the ground.

A hyacinth blossomed where Ling Wu had sat.

§

After strapping my backpack to the sissy-bar, I gave Betty a hug and kiss goodbye.

"I'm sorry you didn't get the mental rest you were looking for," she said.

I laughed, "Don't be," I said. "No one gets mental rest on the shores of Lake Zoar. There's too much magic in the air."

"Then you're not disappointed?"

"Are you kidding? Two wonderful things happened to me while I was here."

"What things?"

"You fucked me almost to death, and I learned that Something at the center of Everything has one hell of a sense of humor. The universe moves, not by the cattle-prod, but by the one-liner. In the beginning was the Joke."

Betty shook her head, smiling. "Shoki, I don't know about you," she said.

I looked over the top of the Shinto shrine in her backyard. Then I squeezed her hand.

"Just keep me posted if you ever see Ling Wu leaping over the moon," I said. "Although with your sexual preferences, that's not too likely."

And I leaped quickly onto my motorcycle and took off, dodging her swift fists and good-humored invective.

<§>

7. *THE PROCESSION*

I had no way of anticipating that a simple discussion of the 2nd law of thermodynamics would lead directly to my encounter with the most beautiful woman of all time, Helen of Sparta, better known as Helen of Troy. However, that's what life with Moonstone is all about.

I've learned to be very emotionally and intellectually resilient with him around. If his responses to all sorts of questions could be emulated on computer software, there wouldn't be a kid in a school who, upon graduation, wouldn't be ready for every possible contingency in life. If I ever need to get rich, that's an idea I'll pursue.

The discussion was prompted by the following letter:

Dear Mr. Shaula:

You've got to help me, I'm desperate! I re-read Rifkin's Entropy for the tenth time since it was published ten years ago: you might say that's my annual descent into self-torment. In case you're not familiar with the book, Rifkin basically proves that, according to the 2nd law of thermodynamics, all closed energy systems dissolve over time into chaos. Mankind's juggernaut toward technological innovation, rather than solving the problems of entropy, create a geometric progression of energy expenditure that will, sooner rather than later, choke us in our own filth, starve us, infect us, immerse us in self-provoked wars among competing interests for the last remaining resources on this planet.

My wife and kids can't bear to live with me anymore, that's how depressing I am to be around. My doctor says that I've taken my concern for the forebodings inherent in the 2nd law to extremes that threaten my sanity and have made me a candidate for a nervous breakdown. He cautions me that I can't afford to be hospitalized and possibly

lose my job, at which point I will have more immediate and pressing concerns than the collective effects of entropy.

So I play the game and kiss my wife with as much passion as I can muster and play catch with my son as if I had no cognizance of the fact that his generation's social and economic advantages will most likely be overrun by hordes of well-meaning but desperate people who have never known what it is to play catch peacefully with one's father until a gentle twilight falls and I go to work and exchange pleasantries with my co-workers while trying to wipe the vision from my mind of how "nice" we'll be to each other when massive lay-offs hit and illusory cushions against adversity, like insurance plans and investment programs, fail miserably when they're needed the most.

I can't go on like this, Mr. Shaula. I feel like I'm leading a double life, like a CIA agent or a media hero. I'm afraid that I will go mad and ruin even the illusion of happiness and prosperity that cushions the present from the intrusion of the future. I've shared my concerns with several noted men of science and yes, even while they give lip-service to the dreams of meeting the problems of technological growth with new and different technologies, there's something forced in their tone of voice and something evasive in the way their eyes fail to meet mine that sends a chill down my spine. They seem to be saying between the lines, "Look, pal, I work in corporate R&D and I'll pull in the big bucks as long as I can, making my life as pleasant as possible until the shit hits the fan. I didn't create the battle with entropy and, thank God, I won't be around to witness its conclusion."

Needless to say, the scientists have given me little comfort.

That's why I've turned to you. God knows it isn't easy for me to write this letter, since I've always considered myself a scientific rationalist. I've never taken people of your ilk seriously, astrologers and fortune-tellers and UFO nuts and visionaries and so-called channelers in touch with the dead or with aliens from the Pleiades or with entities and spirits neither dead nor born. I dismiss that stuff as squished bullshit, just another scam for certain individuals to a) indulge themselves in working out their self-delusions and b) to make more money quicker than let's say driving a cab or working on an assembly line or hassling up the corporate ladder.

What impresses me about you, Mr. Shaula, is that you don't make money off your work (at least not to my knowledge) and that certain acquaintances of mine who have written letters to you feel you're down to earth. Also, after writing to you they never find themselves on New Age mailing lists, which can't be said for the other people they write to.

So, what can you tell me to help me keep my sanity?

Sincerely,

Nathan Blackwell

It amused me how difficult it was for Mr. Blackwell not to be insulting toward me, seeing as how I was of my "ilk." But his point was well-taken. The man was obviously in dire straits and wouldn't be satisfied with some sort of easy answer, nothing of the "the things of this world are transitory at best, but there's always Heaven" sort of response.

So I sat in front of the monitor staring at fractals generated in a palette of 457 colors while I tried to come up with a response. Of course, many of his concerns reflected my own. While Rifkin's philosophy echoed Thoreau's "Simplify, simplify!", I could look around me at the proliferating Western-style standards of consumerism and conspicuous consumption, at the unshackling of human liberties (in which I was proud to be playing a surreptitious, though not insignificant, role) so that people could spend more of their now-free time watching Dallas or listening to armies of punk rockers or entering the corporate fantasy-lands of Mr. McDonald and Mr. Disney, and I could see that simplification was simply not happening, that too many people had been starved too long for too much and not until at least they had worn themselves out a century hence indulging in Western frenzies of consumption would they be ready to even begin to think about moderating their demands in order to forestall the triumph of the 2nd law of thermodynamics.

By then, of course, it would most likely be too late.

Finally, I turned off the fractal generator and hit the keyboard:

Dear Mr. Blackwell:

I can certainly appreciate your predicament and welcome the opportunity to respond. I, too am familiar with Mr. Rifkin's book, as well as the books of many others who share the same philosophy. Out of concern for your sanity I won't provide you with a bibliography. I, too, consider myself a scientific rationalist and yet I have learned through personal experience (a spontaneous projection of my consciousness beyond the confines of my body) and through a careful study of Dr. John Lilly's research (among others) that there are a variety of experiential states which defy analysis in

traditional scientific terms. Please keep in mind that we must not construe all of science to be what is merely the narrow vision of corporate engineers. "There is more between heaven and earth than is dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio," as Hamlet so well put it.

I find myself currently involved in some research which directly effects the hallowed status of the 2nd law of thermodynamics. When my results are conclusive, I'll write again and hopefully be able to set your mind at rest.

In the meantime, please remind your wife that, however difficult you may be to live with, she can be comforted with the thought that she's not Mrs. Rifkin.

All the best,

Shoki Shaula

§

"Given worlds enough and time . . ." I said, "I've been going about this piecemeal, Moonstone. A grain of decency here, a self-indulgence there. And the point of it? At this moment I don't have the lightest confidence that any bit of it makes a difference to the scheme of life or the cycles and processes which we, as human entities with somewhat focussed consciousnesses, challenge on a daily basis and struggle and strain to bend to our will. Why, for all I know, the astrophysicists may be wrong in their estimates by several magnitudes and our sun will go nova tomorrow, and that's that."

"Mr. Shaula," said Moonstone, looking out of the mirror with narrowed eyes betokening genuine concern, "what's eating you?" This brought on a cunning smile, Moonstone being immensely taken with his growing proficiency in New York vernacular.

I read Mr. Blackwell's letter in its entirety, and then my response.

I often thought Moonstone should try and grow a beard like human males, such as myself, because the way he stroked his smooth green chin seemed somehow pointless.

"Yes," he said, after giving the matter much thought, "your people's laws of thermodynamics: I've often wondered about them myself. They do seem to create a good deal of anxiety in you."

"Can you blame us," I said, "all things considered."

"Well," he answered simply, "if they were as universal and significant as you claim they are, then I couldn't be here with you the way I am, nor do the things I do. True?"

"True," I said. "Which brings me to the next question . . ."

"Mr. Shaula," Moonstone interrupted, "allow me to anticipate: you want a new set of equations to furnish your scientific community with more appropriate mathematical models. Something that will help you to account for me."

"Let's not go overboard with this," I said. "A unified field theory involving gravitons would be good for starters. Accounting for you . . . well, I don't know that my people are anywhere near ready for that. I know I'm not. As far as I know, you could still be a delusion resulting from the toxic aftershock of my wicked lifestyle. Six months with Moonstone, then locomotor ataxia, if you get my drift."

Moonstone laughed, cradling his head with both hands.

"Get my drift'!" he said. "What a way you people have with words! I'll have to remember that."

§

With Moonstone in tow, I performed an experiment. I packed the mirror in my sack and got on my '82 GPz1100 and headed north on the West Side Highway. That bike flew: there's a hairpin turn just north of where the Drive runs into the highway, and I took it at full tilt. As I let go of the throttle when I spotted the back-up from the tolls, however, the road and tollbooths faded, sort of dissolved, and, when I stopped the bike, my feet rested on lush grass. The air smelled rich, sweet and intoxicating like I had never smelled it before, and there were just trees and mountains all around me, not a hint of concrete or brick-work or construction-grade steel.

The little green bastard had done all right.

I turned off the engine immediately: that sweet throb which, in more familiar contexts, so enthralled me, seemed--in this quiet wilderness--an obscenity. Then off came the helmet and goggles.

I saw the torches pass maybe 100 yards away beyond a copse of trees. I reached into the side-slung pouch to make sure my big white rat, beautiful Isis, was comfortable. Then, pocketing the keys, I left the bike behind me in the woods.

They were young, in their teens and twenties. Obviously, elders such as I had their own ceremonies to welcome spring. The youths, male and female, wore loose chitons and tunics in the classical Greek mode. In the torchlight that etched and exploded the darkness, they seemed

no longer human but ascended spirits, part angel, part starstuff. The couple at their head, garlanded and obviously the Emperor and Empress of the ceremony, led the chants. Their words, though unintelligible to me, bore the unmistakable lisps and burrs of ancient Greek.

::MOONSTONE, YOU DID IT, YOU LITTLE SONOFABITCH :: QUICK, I GOTTA PEE, AND THEN WE'RE GONNA WATCH THE SOUL OF MY RACE, WHEN IT WAS YOUNG, MADE MANIFEST ::

Or something like that, I hope not as pompous, but I had to pee so bad in my excitement to see history that I'm lucky I remembered anything of my arrival, at all. In fact, now that I remember it, it felt like I hadn't peed in about 2500 years. I was desperate.

The somber drone of my pee splashing on a bush played ideal counterpoint to the mixed voices passing in the woods. Their spoken language was music, and when they actually made music with their chants, male and female timbres twining like snakes, I could feel a palpable magic in the air. When, thank God, the stream of urine slackened and finally dried out, I tucked myself in and hustled in the shadows to follow the celebrants and observe.

Of course, Helen of Troy, or Sparta--depending on the time of her life you pick--is part of mankind's folkloric tradition. I am aware that the Helen of legend had no real historical analogue but was simply a weaving of oral traditions which originated with the supremacy and then de-thronement of the Mother Goddess. I know all that. And, unlike Faust who falls head over heels for the first sexy succubus conjured in Mephistopheles's mirror, I was capable of maintaining a certain degree of objectivity when I first saw her, the Empress. I remember thinking at the time that it was only thanks to my dissipated lifestyle that her beauty didn't drive me mad. But at my age and with my experiences, I could still, though barely breathing, admire her with a nod and a wink.

I think I caught her eye in the torchlight from where I hid. She didn't yell or let on that she'd seen me at all, but kept up her half of the chant and passed away from me, drawing me deeper into the forest.

§

There's an excellent way of simulating rebirth. I saw it done and, in fact, tried it, myself.

First, you inhale the fumes of an incense made of dried mushrooms, I mean you really suck it in and hold it as long as you can. Then you crawl between two boulders into absolute darkness and stale air. The motions you have to make while you thread yourself among the droppings of a glacier into the mountain's inner sanctum reproduce the motions of the emerging fetus. You go in and in, from darkness to darkness, unaware of time or the cuts on your flesh or the growing chill as you squirm your way into hidden parts of the mountain.

I tend to be claustrophobic, but there I was, squirming away with the rest of them, happy as a pig in shit. I attribute that to the effects of the incense. Otherwise, I would have had a panic attack in the absolute--and I mean absolute darkness and driven myself mad.

It could have taken hours, I have no way of knowing, but suddenly there was a glow of torchlight scoring the edges of the rocks, and the air warmed. I kept up the same pace, however, unhurried, relishing every slide and squirm, until I pulled myself into the cavern with the rest of them.

It seemed part cathedral and part fallopian tube: stalactites and stalagmites streaked with carnelian, the color of blood. An old woman, a crone, I supposed, and a Sibyl, took over the

chant with a weak and trembling voice that verified her old age. But there was that in her voice, as well, which overwhelmed me with its certainty, its lack of compromise.

Old vessel that she was, she was still worthy of channeling the words of God.

You reach the Great Rock in the center of the cavern, and by that time you're laughing hysterically. Then you dip your right hand in the ground up pigment and leave a right-hand print on the rock, along with thousands of ancient prints, long since indistinguishable, one from another. Then, on the Less Rock you lean your left hand, palm open, and smear pigment around it, leaving a negative image along with thousands, on the rock.

Then you simply squirm your way back out, laughing.

That's how one gets reborn.

§

:: MOONSTONE :: and the drums, the drums :: YOU WILD LITTLE GREEN SONOFABITCH ::

§

The poets would say that the ancient world went to war over her, for surely dozens of chieftains had competed for her. But the Emperor had been told by the Goddess-out-of-the-smoke that he had merited her for deeds performed since the last leafing-out. Even the Emperor seemed not to know exactly what those deeds were, and therefore bestowed the mistletoe bough upon his bride with humility. And yes, Helen of Sparta and Troy was all of these women, down through generations of warriors and chieftains, until the songs of the bards, acknowledging the death of the ritual, itself, made her one woman and fixed her essence forever.

But there she was, one of the many, and I witnessed the ritual, I witnessed all of it.

§

I remember Isis scurrying among the dancers while I lay stretched out on my back, my brain lost among the stars. She kept coming back, though, to sniff me out living or dead and, finding me just mad, returned to her explorations.

§

Hearing the growl of the engine and seeing the right turn up, I knew I was back from the dawning of my race. My nostrils seemed tintured with burnt oil and animal fat. My back ached where she squeezed my flesh with all her might.

I was back.

That evening, I sat at the keyboard and wrote Mr. Blackwell a letter:

Dear Sir:

Take it for what it's worth, but my experiment was a success and I can assure you that the laws of thermodynamics and the laws of quantum mechanics and the laws of relativity and the laws of economics and physics and mathematics and the commonwealth and the state of New York and the city of New York and the lex talionis and the Code of Hammurabi and the law of the Prophets and the law of the jungle and all of that is just a part of what we are, and that's important to recognize.

Make yourself over, Mr. Blackwell, get born once more in whatever space inside you feels most empty and most in need of a new lease on life. And still you'll just be scratching the surface of all that really is.

Yes, sir, I can already feel the new you breaking out of the shell and working your way, wet and glistening, into a new life.

You're a lucky man, Mr. Blackwell. Give my regards to your wife.

Sincerely,

Shoki Shaula

§

Isis had made her nest in my helmet. I laughed, took her out and put her back in her tank, and shook the pebbles into the wastebasket.

I laughed and laughed.

<§>

7. *THE JOSEPH EXERCISES*

I had one of those Orwellian spy-catchers hooked onto my phone, which gives the number of the incoming call. I'd about had it with the calls I'd been receiving. Sure enough, it rang again, and, sure enough, the LCD read: (666) 666-6666.

Very funny.

"Moonstone," I said, "are you sure this isn't some friend of yours?"

The face in the mirror shook from side to side with wide eyes. "I have no idea who's calling you," he said.

I picked up the receiver and said, "Listen, asshole . . ."

"Listen, asshole, yourself," came that voice I'd come to hate, then metallic, somewhat grisly, humorless laughter. "I've got big plans for you. Don't think your puny green friend is going to be able to bail you out, either. By the time I'm through with you, you'll kiss my ass for the privilege of kissing my ass!"

"Don't count on it, schmuck," I growled back. "I'm not Shoki the Demon-Queller for nothing. I laugh at disembodied voices. I flip the bird at ectoplasmic presences. I eat vampires for lunch, cocksucker."

"Suck on this, wimp," the voice shot back.

The receiver in my hand turned instantly into a soft ripe turd, swarming with maggots. The stench launched me into a spasm of dry heaves and I ran like hell into the bathroom to lean over the toilet, prepared for the worst. Then I had to wash my hand several times with soap and Gunk to get the smell off.

In my haste to clean myself up, I forgot that the original turd was still on the floor in front of my computer, and, likewise, had pretty much filled the apartment with its stink. I had to clean it up, flush it, scrub the floor and open all the windows to air the place out. "Jesus Christ," I said, "what a royal pain in the ass . . ."

The phone cord hung to the floor without a receiver. "Moonstone," I said, "I need a suitable replacement."

He nodded and a fog of vapor whirled around the end of the cord. Something didn't smell right, however, and, when the fog coalesced, instead of a receiver there was a second maggotty turd.

"Uh oh," Moonstone said.

Demonic laughter echoed from one end of the apartment to another.

"Powerful forces at work here," I said, breathing through my nose. "Never mind, Moonstone. I'll do without a phone for awhile."

And, amidst my usual surly grumbling when confronted by THINGS TO BE CLEANED UP, I cleaned up the mess a second time. I enjoyed it even less than the first time.

When I finished, I sank down in my chair and gazed into the mirror under heavy eyelids.

"How did Whatever-it-is fuck with your magic?" I said.

"Mr. Shaula, it's not what I'd quite call magic . . ."

"Never mind that. How did it get fucked with?"

Moonstone averted his eyes and shook his head. "I don't know," he said.

"I don't like the sound of that," I said. "I've learned to expect a lot from you. We're involved on a thousand fronts with saving-the-world and now's not a good time for you to get feet of clay. I'm not a big fan of revising my game-plans."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Shaula," Moonstone said simply. The little guy was obviously as perplexed as I, and I regretted the harshness in my voice.

"Hey, no, listen, forget it," I said. "We have a problem here, and we'll just have to work it out, together. It's not your fault."

My words seemed to give him small comfort. Genie that he was, he was deeply annoyed at this startling turn of events. Being helpless evoked emotions that seemed totally unfamiliar to him, and he began to stroke his chin furiously, losing himself in the autism of his chagrin.

That's when I noticed something new.

"Hey, Moonstone," I said, "don't tell me you're growing a beard!"

He looked up from his agitation and cracked a small smile. "Yes," he said, "I thought I'd try it."

"Well, well, well." I leaned closer to the mirror to check it out. Sure enough, green peach fuzz had begun to darken his upper lip, the tip of his chin, and the far curves of his jaw. "Now that's going to look real nice," I said. "In fact, a green beard could become one of the more desirable entities in the universe. You'll be the envy of millions."

Moonstone smiled more broadly. He was cheering up.

"It takes time and dutiful cultivation, though," I added. "You'll probably have to trim it a few times before it gets thick enough to be respectable. But you'll find that having a beard is one of the few unmitigated pleasures available to a man during his lifetime."

I crossed my arms behind my head.

"In fact," I concluded, "sometimes, when the shit hits the fan, having a beard is the only thing a man has to fall back on . . ."

§

Manifestations began that night, and what a night it was!

First, I woke up out of a sound sleep with things crawling around my face, in and out of my beard, up my nose. I almost swallowed one when I first shot up awake, and nearly snorted another, as well. I jumped off the mattress to turn on the light and felt little cracks and pops under my feet. With the light on I could see the whole place swarming with bugs: roaches, waterbugs mostly, but a good sprinkling of termites, silverfish and a pack or two of red ants, a definite rarity in the Upper West Side ecosystem.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit. . . " I remember saying as I hopped from foot to foot, slapping myself all over to get rid of the little bastards from the sanctity of my person. Every orifice was clenched tight in my sudden and desperate concern over insect intrusion. My place was thick with them, on the walls, dropping on me from the ceiling, nesting in the folds of my bed blanket. The red ants actually tried to make a meal out of my flesh, forcing me to devote my left hand solely to the preservation of my as-yet unassaulted genitalia. I lurched like a mad man into the kitchen to grab a can of bug spray from under the sink, only to find the place churning in all three dimensions with ranks and files of insect life. Everywhere I stomped my bare feet I left

puddles of bloody vermin, but they kept on coming, out of nowhere, out of what had to be my worst nightmare: or so I thought.

"Moonstone!" I hollered, yet keeping my lips tightly pursed to avoid swallowing little intruders. "Do something! Get these bastards outta here!!"

I was living a Manhattanite's worst fear and, what with stomping and smashing and slapping the bugs off me, I had become a true whirling dervish, looked into an abject, mindless dance for survival, my conscious mind stripped down to the bare perceptions of terror and the absolute necessity for self-preservation.

Fortunately, Moonstone's a quick thinker, for in my madness, I was of little help in directing a counter-assault. But he, in his own inimitable way, had enlarged and duplicated several of my insectivorous pets, most notably my little golden ring-neck snake, Kook, and Luigi and Antonio, my Italian tree-snakes with their wedge-shaped bodies and triangular heads. Yes, Moonstone met force with force, commanding streams of snakes, thousands of clones of my little guys, into the fray, their voracious appetites making short work of the invading army. Where bugs scurried, the snakes slithered after them, big as monitor lizards, chomping and swallowing as fast as insect reinforcements could emerge from the walls or fall off the ceilings. It was a battle worthy of a National Geographic tv special, but, as I said before, I was a madman at the time, much too crazed with my own immediate terrors and fight for survival to study the mechanisms of prey and predator with any semblance of objectivity.

And then it was over, the insect swarms overrun by a sort of spaghetti mulch of snakes. Then the snakes faded into oblivion, all but the master-forms which rested quietly once again in their snug aquariums, practically smiling for all the fresh eats.

It took me a long time to stop trembling and to be able to speak. I felt like a wino waking up in detox after a major bout of dt's.

"They were all over me, their little stinking feet walking up and down my body, their bug-shells cracking everywhere I stepped... the horror . . . the horror . . ."

"Calm down, Mr. Shaula," Moonstone said, "they're gone now. No more left. You're ok."

"Ok!" I continued ranting, "it'll be years before I can sit down on a toilet or slip under the covers without breaking into a cold sweat. I'm trembling and I think I'm going to throw up. I probably swallowed enough roaches to infest a brownstone."

I suppose Moonstone figured radical measures were called for: in his slender green fingers a thin flute appeared and he put it to his lips, playing a tune that I can only describe as in a genre of its own, electro-mystico-transmutational. It worked, however. In seconds I could breathe normally, and, in a few more seconds, I could actually sit down naked on the chair in front of my computer and face my little green ally in his mirror.

"What's going on?" I barely breathed.

The flute disappeared. "I've been giving this a lot of thought, Mr. Shaula," he said. "I think something's out to get me, and it's out to get me by getting you."

"Out to get you? I don't know, Moonstone. That sounds awfully 'terrestrial', if you know what I mean. I gave you goblins and ghoulies a little more credit than that."

"It doesn't happen often, that's for sure," he said, scratching his head. "Whatever it is, it doesn't want us to continue our work."

"Our work? I'm taking one day at a time, that's the extent of it. My manic excursions into militant virtue are hardly what I'd call 'our work'."

"Regardless," said Moonstone, stroking the fine green hair-tips of his embryonic beard, "something feels threatened and wants us stopped."

"Fine," I said, "from now on I'll use you only for purposes of my personal lust, greed and self-indulgence. Anything to avoid another night like tonight. Obviously, you can't give me any guarantees of protection. I'm afraid this thing's bigger than both of us. I'll surrender without a fight. There. Now, back to living."

Moonstone stared closely at me from his mirror. There was neither scorn nor disappointment in his eyes, only an intense look of inquiry.

"What happened to Shoki the Demon-Queller?" he asked simply.

The barbed arrow of his naive expectations struck me in the middle of my heart.

"O Christ, Moonstone," I moaned, "ok, ok, I'll fight back. I'm not ashamed of my cowardice, under the circumstances, but I suppose that down the road the shame will creep in and that'll be worse than a subway full of roaches. Ah, you moralistic little bastard: I hope where you come from there really is a God with a sense of justice. We're going to need Him."

That's when the phone rang. Yes, the receiver was somehow, once again, intact. Against my better judgment, I picked it up.

I first became acquainted with the legend of Shoki or Chuan-Ki, the Demon-Queller, at Ho's Golden Palace restaurant in Oceanside, NY. A scene from Shoki's adventures chasing little demons and throwing them into his ever-present sack hung on the wall just past the coat-racks, an ink painting 3 feet by 4 feet done by some underpaid master artist on the Chinese mainland. Shoki, like his counterpart, Herakles, in the Greek world, was one of those figures of legend shared by many Oriental cultures, even sworn enemies like China and Japan, and that is because his legends are so psychologically compelling. Shoki was, first of all, purely mortal, and could make no claim to divine parentage, unlike Herakles, whose father was the great Zeus. Yet, regardless of his mortality, he undertook the task of ridding his world of all demons. He was absolutely fearless and would charge right in to any nest of demonic activity, his hair and beard long and wild, his eyes manic unto insanity, his cloak ragged and suggestive of his many travels and his hard life as a hermit dedicated to his obsessive pursuit of demons. And his sword was long and sharp. At least that's how he was depicted in the painting, a fearless wildman stuffing dozens of little monsters into an oft-patched sack to bring them back to Hell for safe-keeping. Mr. Ho, nodding and smiling, filled me with the romance of Shoki's story, how through his dedication to his task he became first a hero, then an immortal and, to this day, guards the gates of Hell. My father, however, saw the painting merely as an object lesson concerning my hippy tonsure: "See," he used to say pointing to the painting, "you want to grow up and look like that? Get a haircut or that's how you're going to end up!" Naturally, I was thus inspired to grow my hair longer and sprout a beard when the right hormones started to percolate, and I even adopted the Shoki nickname instead of my given Isaac Jacob. Actually, Lily christened me Shoki during a serving of beef lo mein, teasing me about the way I looked, hoping to piss me off, but, instead, I liked the idea and thanked her for it, bending across the table to give her a quick kiss on the forehead, an endearment from me which she always hated, it was so patronizing.

I was always frustrated, however, in the matter of Shoki's eyes: no matter how wild my hair and beard grew, my eyes never assumed that implacable glare of total commitment which was one of Shoki's characteristics. I found myself glancing in plate glass windows as I walked along the streets, trying to see if somehow that glare would evolve over time. But no such luck. I grew up and left the comfortable suburbs for a ramshackle hand-to-mouth life in the big city, I studied and mastered a variety of martial arts and esoteric philosophies, I practiced magick and meditation, attained spiritual and physical ecstasies, I even lived for several months in an Adirondack lean-to during a particularly harsh winter, surviving on transcendental thoughts and magic mushrooms: but when the smoke cleared, my eyes were the same, nothing like Shoki's. They were still the eyes of the peacemaker, the negotiator, the conciliator, the man who loves dogs and children and flowers, the man who peacefully protests on behalf of social justice, a conscientious objector in war, a gadfly in peace, an admirer of Gandhi and King and Einstein, a-- God forgive me--gentle soul.

That is, until that night when I experienced the sheer and absolute terror of bugs in my mouth and up my ass: after that second phonecall and the mocking voice of an entity which could propel me into abject terror and debasing cowardice in an instant, which could humiliate and confound me as easily as it did, I went into the bathroom to splash some cold water on my face and there, in the cracked mirror over the sink, were the beard and the hair and yes, now, the wild eyes.

Sooner or later, I thought to myself, inwardly pleased, sometimes through the most painful way possible, we get what we want.

Now I figured, those eyes were a badge of courage I had to live up to.

Therefore, I took a stroll down to the Jewish Theological Seminary to visit my old friend, Hananya Goodman, to plan my strategy.

§

Hananya's office was like my back room: a mess. That's part of why I felt very comfortable meeting with him. I could put my feet up on his desk, scratch my balls at will, use foul language where appropriate and generally be free to let the rhythm and flow of ideas play itself out in my mind without the gnawing distraction of a concern for abstract formalities.

Hananya, on the other hand, although he accepted these liberties in me, was, himself, a person chaste in word and deed. None of my vulgarity rubbed off on him, and he could endure the recital of my human frailties with good humor and detachment, although he did become troubled when our discussions revolved around sex.

For example, I once asked him, "Hananya, can you tell me why Jews practice circumcision?"

He looked at me from behind his thick glasses with surprise, and yet a smile. "Why, because that's the essence of the Jewish covenant with God as established by Abraham. You know that. You have another theory?"

"Of course. I mean, what you've just told me doesn't really tell me anything. And you know that--nothing but mythology and legend. Try again: why does circumcision play such a central role in Judaism?"

"Well, like many of the dietary and ritual laws there are practical benefits in terms of health and hygiene--"

"Hananya, I'm disappointed in you. You're beginning to sound like an urbane Reform rabbi blithely justifying the abandonment of ritual when equally pragmatic results are obtained within the secular experience."

"Then, Shoki my friend, tell me why Jews practice circumcision?"

I leaned back in his chair and smiled, just brimming with worldly wisdom.

"Because," I said, "the early tribal chiefs needed a way to keep their men away from the women of other tribes. Back in those days, a circumcised penis must have struck Gentile women as a pointless abomination of the male genitalia, making Jewish cocks objects of scorn and derision. I'm sure the tribal chiefs knew that the only way to keep men from indulging in the wide variety of cunningly creative sexual practices among the Gentiles was to actually make them ashamed to drop their drawers in their presence. 'Moral suasion' would have no effect against the allures of so-called pagan sexuality, all those non-kosher pleasures for heterosexual males like two or more women in the sack with you at once, or anal intercourse or blow-jobs: O no, no holy scrolls could keep a desert people from scrambling to enjoy themselves as much as they can, considering the hard life their nomadism demanded of them. So, by clipping off the sheaths of their dicks, the Jewish male was discouraged from presenting himself to non-Jewish women, who were accustomed to seeing normal penises hanging off their fathers and brothers."

Hananya was clearly uncomfortable. "Ok," he said, throwing up his hand, "I see the logic of what you say. Now, what's the point of it?"

"The point, my friend, is that my interpretation of circumcision preserves the subtle wisdom of the practice. Back when our tribes were setting themselves apart from the other

nomads and from the settled agricultural communities, it probably made a great deal of sense to the political leadership to combat the drives of human nature in this way. Why, if you've ever been in bed with two chicks at once, it's hard to go back to a hole in the sheet, if you know what I mean. With circumcision, Jewish men were driven to remain in circulation among Jewish women, who, because of the cultural expectations derived from the circumcisions of their fathers and brothers, grew up to find an uncircumcised cock an abomination. See? Without this kind of rationale, why, circumcision's just one more act of pagan scarification. It worked for both men and women, although back then none of the women really had much say in who put what inside them. But that's another issue. . . ."

And on and on. I'm sure sometimes Hananya found an hour with me to be like hanging suspended over the flames of Sheol by fishhooks through his thumbs, but, on the other hand, he was an ordained rabbi and he found the secularity of my ideas and lifestyle to be challenging practice for many of those issues he'd confront later, when he left academia for the tumult and turmoil of a congregation of his own. I'm sure he felt that, after a few years swapping theories with me, he'd be hardened against the shock of dealing with problems involving intimacies of a universal nature.

That's why poor Hananya enjoyed my visits, even if I made him a little nervous.

So this time I said to him, "Hananya, I need help. I think I'm confronting the unmitigated power of absolute Evil."

Hananya laughed. "I'm sure with you, Shoki, it's not the first time," he said.

"No, you don't understand. Until recently I never believed in the existence of an actual force of pure Evil. I mean, I always felt that people we commonly referred to as 'evil' were, for

the most past, misguided by their environment or upbringing, or else, like the Hitlers and Bundys of the world, psychopaths. I never gave credence to the belief in a godlike consciousness dedicated to the propagation of pure Evil throughout the world. I'm talking Satan, here, Hananya. I'm talking Samael, the Darth Vader of the ancient world."

Hananya was nonplused.

"And why do you believe in such a thing now?" he asked.

"Never mind. It's a long story. But it's after me, Hananya. I know it sounds crazy and I'll stoically submit to all the raised eyebrows you can dish out but I need some kind of game plan. A defensive strategy. This is all uncharted waters to me."

"If this is uncharted waters to you, my friend, how in the world can you expect me to help you out?"

"You're a kabbalist and a mystic. Such entities as Satan and Samael are well within the purview of your discipline."

"I'm neither a kabbalist nor a mystic," he corrected. "I study kabbalistic traditions and the writings of mystics. I would never presume to claim that I was one . . ."

"More's the pity, Hananya. If anyone could be invigorated by submersion in waters of Kabbala, it would be you. You should let yourself go sometime, play with the numbers and hidden meanings and amulets. Look, I won't split hairs with you: let's pretend you are a kabbalist and the Devil's on your ass. Based on your knowledge of the ancient mystical ways, what would you do?"

Hananya looked at his watch.

"Shoki, I'll play this game with you for five minutes," he said, "and then I have to get back to my work."

I looked at my watch and even set my timer.

"Fair enough," I said. "Go!"

He sighed and shook his head, then allowed himself to drift away into his inner world of thought. He, like many of his colleagues, had the beard of an elder but was a babe in the woods when it came to the challenges of the real world. But, the lessons of life must be, for all us, learned ultimately through the harsh crucible of experience.

He still had over a minute to go (a minute-five, to be exact) when he blinked his eyes and smiled at me.

"Well?" I said.

"If I were a kabbalist and were truly being hunted down by Satan," he said, "I'd make myself a golem."

"That's it!" I shouted, jumping to my feet. "Hananya, once again my conversation with you has proved fruitful beyond measure. A golem! Of course!"

I was halfway down the stairs heading for the door when my timer beeped: beep-beep, beep-beep, beep-beep . . .

"Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption."

Nothing happened.

"The portal of God is non-existence."

Still nothing. Moonstone blinked.

"This transformation is so sacred that it must be undergone in darkness."

I sniffed something in the air this time, the first whiff of mortality.

"No soul is rested till it is made nought as to all things that are made."

Yes, the little clay figure seemed to give off a pearlescent luster. Now, for the coup de grâce:

"Sh'ma yisroel Adonai elohenu, Adonai echod!"

Moonstone had been straining so hard that jade-colored beads of sweat dripped down his forehead, but the effort paid off: the golem lived! It spread its little arms and kicked out its little legs, dancing for the sheer thrill of being alive. I had carved it from a lump of keolinite which Moonstone had acquired for me, a rare clay which Graham Cairns-Smith hypothesized was the inorganic precursor of life, itself, in the early days of Earth's formation. Be that as it may, the stuff suited my purposes and Moonstone and I laughed heartily as the little mannequin danced and leaped all over the clutter on my desk.

Out of whimsy I had carved the golem to look like Hananya: bushy beard, yarmulke, thick glasses. Too bad my friend would never know how seriously I took his advice.

In keeping with tradition I named the golem "Joseph".

"We're on our way, now," I told Moonstone, ecstatically. "Do you realize that this is the first time you and I made magic together?"

Moonstone beamed.

"I enjoyed the companionship," he said. "We'll have to do that more often."

"Well, it still remains to be seen how effective we are as a team. We may end up relegated to casino lounges and telethons if this idea doesn't pay off."

"Or worse," Moonstone cautioned.

"Thanks," I said. "Now I've got to make a call."

I picked up the receiver and Joseph leaped onto my arm, scurrying up my sleeve to dance on my shoulder.

"Man," I laughed, "we've got him now!"

I dialled all sixes.

That's when Joseph bit me on the ear.

§

The showdown was set for a strip-joint on 47th Street: Satan's Choice. I had less than a week to come to terms with my little ace-in-the-hole.

Several times I was tempted to throw the little sonofabitch out the window. When he bit, he never failed to draw blood. Then he'd keep on dancing, happy as a pig in shit, without a care in the world.

"Listen, you little prick," I'd shout, sucking the blood off my finger or hand or forearm, "we don't have time for these shenanigans. You're my golem and you've got to fight for righteousness over evil. Now, I appreciate the fact that that's no easy job, but biting me isn't going to make it any easier for either of us. So knock it off."

Joseph would pay no attention. He'd leap off my shoulder or off my head and onto the floor or a chair or a table and just keep dancing. He even started humming this upbeat tune, something like a sailor's chanty. He never spoke, so I presumed he couldn't. But nothing stopped him from dancing, humming or biting.

Moonstone stared out of his mirror, amazed.

"I don't know about this golem idea . . ." he said.

"Listen," I said back, "getting adjusted to having you around wasn't any picnic, either. Give the guy a chance."

"Suit yourself." Moonstone watched Joseph arching and swaying and leaping from foot to foot, just having a grand old time.

Moonstone shook his head.

"At least I never bit anybody," he said.

I devised a methodology for relating better to my golem which I called "The Joseph Exercises." They went like this:

Exercise 1: Joseph the Golem will be accompanying me into battle against the quintessential force of Evil: Satan. This battle will be on Satan's turf and will require positive mental concentration on the task at hand, exclusive of capricious incidents or environmental peculiarities. Therefore, the first set of exercises will be for me to travel throughout Manhattan with Joseph, bearing him safely through one environment after another, until such time as he trusts me sufficiently to protect him from alien noises and presences and will be able to focus him complete attention upon "foreground" confrontations of my choice and direction.

To accomplish this, I took the little guy everywhere. He rode my shoulder when I bicycled from my apartment to the Cloisters, which I toured with him in my pouch, looking out. Even though a golem doesn't need food, he enjoyed sharing a raspberry Italian ice with me and seemed particularly fond of climbing the topiary bushes and dancing on top of them. I took him on my motorcycle tucked inside my helmet where he could hang onto my hair and look out. We took the Midtown Tunnel to the Greenpoint Avenue section of Queens where we shared an excellent linguine alla burro. He found the motorcycle ride through the tunnel especially thrilling and I could hear him humming some sort of triumphal raga as we sped over the tarmac and past dull-witted tunnel attendants who stared out at the endless stream of traffic from behind glass enclosures. I took him on the IRT from 125th Street to Battery Park during which excursion he leaped out of my pocket to give sight to three blind beggars, heal the gangrenous legs of two bag ladies and prevent the mugging of an old man with a shopping bag full of groceries by a gang of four teenagers. Joseph accomplished the latter feat when I pulled him out of my pouch and tossed him at the gang's leader and shouted, "Joseph, kick ass!!" at which

he promptly slithered down the youth's shirt and bit him mercilessly upon the nipples, the pectoral flesh and under his armpits, during which the youth dropped his assorted weapons and fled screaming from the subway car, his cronies close on his tail. He reappeared shortly in my pouch, licking the red off his lips and dancing a sprightly victory dance.

Exercise 2: Joseph the Golem will emulate the synchronous rhythms generated by me when engaged in such activities as generate said rhythms. This will develop an empathic bond between us such that my non-verbal expressions of doubt, fear, necessity etc., will be perceived and responded to by him without undue confusion or waste of time.

In this regard I brought Joseph up to the roof of my building where I had dumbbells and a weight bench all set up for workouts. He balanced himself in the infamous crane position on the center of the barbell while I bench-pressed, and swayed his body from side to side as the barbell went up and down, up and down. He stood on my head and raised his hands to the sky each time I hefted 20 lb. dumbbells in lateral flies. And he leaped from one end of the broomstick to the other during each repetition of abdominal oblique twists. Finally, at the end of each workout, Joseph jogged with me through Cherry Park and around Grant's Tomb and back again, seated all the while on the top of my head, a clutch of hair in each hand, posting with each footfall like a seasoned equestrian.

Finally, exercise 3: Joseph the Golem will respond to special series of hand gestures which evoke imprinted, patterned and archetypal responses without either verbal or visual prompting.

This exercise turned out to be very important both in terms of increasing Joseph's response to tactile stimulation offered by me in a positive, socially-appropriate manner (no

biting) and increasing, as well, the variety of his non-verbal responses to such external stimuli, because, when dancing with the Devil, one never knows what's going to happen, do one?

This exercise was accomplished by me sitting in a meditative posture (preferably cushioned by my zafu) and assuming a meditative trance state. Joseph stood on the floor beside me, at the ready, awaiting the slow descent of my right hand, fingers wiggling. As my fingers strummed the floor in cadence with my breathing and the chanting of my mantra, Joseph would assume a variety of dance postures, leaping nimbly between my fingers or mounting my flexing hand and working his dance into the rhythms generated by my meditative state. He often played two sticks together during this exercise, generating contrapuntal clicks and clicks. At the end of each session he would leap forward, somersault 4½ times in succession, and land on his feet, arms spread wide, sticks turned neatly down along his forearms.

Yes, I designed dozens of exercises for our regimen, but we had less than a week and therefore concentrated on the three which seemed most promising. At the end of the week and just prior to our heading downtown to Satan's Choice, I presented Joseph to Moonstone's image in the mirror.

"Well," I said, "what do you think of my protégé?"

Joseph stood at attention, brought his palms together, and, smiling, bowed at the waist.

Moonstone seemed dubious. "Does he still bite?" he asked.

I held out my forefinger and Joseph leaped aboard with a double somersault.

"Only when it's absolutely necessary," I said, laughing.

Moonstone stroked his now-luxuriant green beard.

"He's definitely come a long way," he said. "Let's hope that tonight he's on his best behavior."

The buddha-nature of any golem is the Ineffable Name of God worked throughout its being. That's what gives the golem its power. The Ineffable Name of God, though known to no mortal, works itself mystically into the golem during the recitation of moral precepts performed at its creation.

Joseph had accomplished much during his training and was now, I truly believed, ready to encounter Satan.

I had evolved considerably during those exercises, as well. I looked at my reflection in the window opposite where I sat on the subway and yes, there was Shoki the Demon-Queller to a 't': beard, hair and, most importantly, eyes. I, too, had learned much from the miracle that was Joseph and, while I was by no means able to articulate much of what I had come away with, I felt prepared for the evening's encounter.

I patted my pouch and Joseph peeked out, smiling.

"We're ready, buddy," I said. "You and I are in prime form tonight! We'll just play it by ear and kick some ass!"

I recognized Satan as soon as we walked in the door, even though the bar was packed asshole to asshole and the strippers were in full swing. He was standing at a triangulation directly beneath and between the beautiful Patty Cake's erect nipples dressed in talis and teffillin with long dark beard, peyases, and the black coat of a hasid. He held a Hebrew prayer book open in front of him and worked his lips silently while he dovened back and forth.

Obviously none of the other patrons could see him because, had they done so, their enjoyment of Patty Cake and her two friends would have been somewhat muted, to say the least.

I strode up to Satan and clapped him on the shoulder. He looked up from his prayer book and grinned a pervert's grin. Tufts of stiff dark hair grew out of both nostrils and each ear.

"Ah, Mr. Shaula I presume?"

His fetid breath almost sent me to the john, but I held tight and recovered.

"You've got some fucking nerve coming to a place like this done up like that," I scolded.

"And it's shabos!"

Satan simply smiled.

"I am every man's fantasy," he said, "and every man's nightmare. Besides, I felt it only appropriate since you saw fit to bring your golem!"

Sonofabitch! I thought to myself, He found me out . . .

"He's my equalizer, asshole," I shot back though not even blinking. "Every Demon-Queller has an equalizer. It's the tools of the trade."

"And the name of the game, no?" Satan laughed, blowing the foul winds of Hell all over me with each breath. My gorge started rising. "But it won't be of any use to you, that equalizer. I will chew him and spew him and then enjoy the gentle music of your voice as you beg me to let you KISS MY ASS!"

Well, to this day I don't know if Joseph mistook what Satan said for "KICK MY ASS" or not, but the little guy flew out of my pouch and disappeared up the devil's black coat. Satan's

eyes widened comically and the prayer book flew out of his hands while he hopped up and down from foot to foot, slapping at his rear end. What a sight.

With a sizzly sound like a dying fart, the bastard disappeared, and Joseph, too.

I looked straight up between Patty Cake's erect nipples, caught her eye and winked. She winked back.

I ordered a Kahlua and Bailey's on the rocks.

§

"And Joseph?" Moonstone asked.

"Y'know," I said, "I had a dream about him last night. It was an unusual dream because it was so incredibly real. I was down in the lowest pit of Hell and there was Satan in his natural ugliness and slime, howling and twisting and squirming like he wanted to split himself apart at the seams. And what do you know but he flips up his tail and this little head peeks out of his asshole and it's Joseph! He winks at me and smiles, licking the blood off his chops, and ducks back in for a couple of more rounds. Then I woke up."

Moonstone sighed.

"Mr. Shaula," he said, "this has been an amazing experience."

"Well, that says a lot," I responded, "coming from you."

"A golem," Moonstone said, scratching his head, "what a remarkable creature."

"Yeah," I said, "that Joseph's a real trooper."

I leaned back and crossed my arms behind my head, my feet resting on the desk. The fractal generator washed the computer monitor with bright arcs of color.

"Nice beard," I said. "Damn nice beard."

<\$>

8. *EARTH MOTHER*

Meg Ryan, Darryl Hannah, and Kim Bassinger, the actresses, climbed down from my sleeping loft, blowing kisses. "Goodbye, Shoki!" they cooed. "You were wonderful. Please invite us back as soon as you have time for us."

"Yes, girls, of course," I said. "You can count on it. But business, unfortunately, must take precedence over sensual indulgence. Sooner or later, that is. But rest assured I'll have you all back for a replay of last night as soon as time and my aching back permits. Goodbye, now! Goodbye!"

"O Shoki," said Meg, laughing. "You're such a devil!"

And they giggled their way into my back room and disappeared.

Actually, they weren't the actresses at all but succubi-clones conjured by Moonstone at my request. I figured that Moonstone, who had appeared so suddenly in my life, could disappear just as suddenly and I didn't want to look back at my lost opportunities when I was 80 and belabor myself for not taking advantage of his presence in every respect. No, no regrets for me when the time came to shelve my sexual identity and pass on into that philosophical persona so lauded by Glaucon in Plato's Symposium, freed of the burden of sexual impulse and desire.

"Yes," I called out, "I know what you're thinking, Moonstone! Shoki the Demon-Queller has finally stepped onto that swiftly-descending road to Hell, himself, the road of lust and unquenchable fire! I know! Hah!!"

"I'm not thinking any such thing, Mr. Shaula," came Moonstone's voice from his mirror in the back room. "I'm not here to judge you."

"Double-hah!!" I said, vaulting off the loft and making for the bathroom to pee. "Be that as it may, whether you're a devil or an angel or something smack in between, a night such as I enjoyed last night should be made available to every human being on earth. Why, those mystical orgone energies we call sexual have been irradiated with fresh power and I can feel them coursing through my brain-body continuum like electric blood. New ideas, Moonstone! Fresh perspectives! Freedom for my imagination to break its bonds with the past and conjure up new approaches to old problems. Why, I feel as if I could develop a cheap process for cold fusion out of toothpicks and soda pop bottles. That's what last night did for me!"

I could hear the smile in Moonstone's voice: "I'm pleased everything worked out so well."

I threw on my t-shirt and jeans and plopped myself down on the chair in front of the mirror.

"So well!" I said. "That's not the tenth of it. We're going big time now, you and I. It's time for some radical and flamboyant transformations among my fellow humans, and you, little demon or little angel, are going to help me make things happen. Now, check this out. . ."

I booted some wild geodesic architectural graphics onto the monitor and scanned them from all angles.

"See?" I said. "Now, I want you to use this as a starting point and then fill in all the little details from your own creative imagination. I want you to blow me away with all those fine touches that make an organic whole out of lifeless, unrelated parts. I want to say when the smoke clears, 'Moonstone, I couldn't have done it better myself!'"

Moonstone laughed, running his slender fingers through his green hair while he studied the Fulleresque series of designs and stroking his radiant green beard while he made innumerable mental notes.

"A whole city, then?" he said.

"For starters. We'll take this project one step at a time. Remember, we must never sacrifice flexibility for a rigid adherence to any one particular game-plan. Always maximize your options, Moonstone."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said. "Now, where do you suggest I build this city?"

I put my feet up on the monitor and crossed my hands behind my head. I was smiling all the way down to my asshole.

"Under glass, Moonstone," I said. "On the planet Mars."

§

The young girl behind the glass partition stared at my copy and shook her head. "Are you serious?" she asked.

"Deadly serious," I said, looking her straight in the eye. She found, in fact, the degree of seriousness I presented her with to be emotionally unbearable so she turned quickly away from me and continued to study the copy.

"I never heard of anything like this before," she said.

"So? You mean that's the criteria for getting a full page ad in the Times? If you've heard of it before? I thought it only took money."

"Look, mister, the New York Times is the definitive world-class newspaper. We don't print just anything because someone can pay for it."

"Look, miss," I said back to her, "this ad is just the first step in what's going to prove to be a lengthy and difficult process, as you might well imagine. And you've already given me a pain in the ass. Now don't you have a supervisor or someone IN AUTHORITY to refer this matter to? I don't have all day to spend jarring your limited imagination."

She took the insult as it was intended and turned abruptly from me to summon someone else. Fine. The less time spent with entry-level idiots, the better.

The matter of my ad over the course of 45 minutes was kicked up through the ranks until it landed in the lap of Mr. Dexter Detweiller for final arbitration. Mr. Detweiller had been

in the business for decades and his face showed it: it had all the puckers and pouches of a rotten avocado. He read my copy, however, and a slow smile split the crust of his face and he shook his head.

Mr. uh Shaula," he droned, "I really don't see how we could possibly . . ."

"Listen," I said. "I'll pay double the going rate, cash, and you can print a disclaimer right up along the top. I'll pay for the disclaimer, too."

With Moonstone around, money was never an object.

Mr Detweiller scratched his head. "A disclaimer?" he asked.

"Yeah, something like, 'We at the Times think the guy who took out this ad is a nut, but he paid cash so here it goes:' Something like that."

Mr. Detweiller smiled and handed the copy to some schlep standing behind him. "Send it down," he said. "A full page."

"Well, it's about time," I said. I opened my knapsack and counted out a considerable pile of hundred dollar bills. "Don't forge the receipt," I said finally.

"O Mr. Shaula," Detweiller said, "you'll get your receipt. Any advertisement that will make journalistic history, one way or another, deserves, at the very least, a receipt."

§

What a crowd there was in Battery Park. Now, don't get me wrong, it wasn't nearly as bad as in '76 when people were jammed asshole-to-asshole for the bicentennial fireworks. But there were enough.

I kept a low profile leaning on one of the pay-for-view binoculars trained on the Statue of Liberty. What better symbolic ambience for this first step in mankind's most liberating adventure than Lady Liberty raising her torch of welcome above the shrinking sea?

Most of the crowd were young, their few essentials packed in knapsacks and shoulder bags, dressed in simple clothes (t-shirts and jeans, for the most part) and sneakers or work-boots. There was, as well, a large contingent of senior citizens who, while dressed casually enough, wanted to take their first steps toward a new and radically different life wearing sport jackets, colorful silk scarves (mostly gifts from loved ones, I figured, for the memories they conjured up), and a variety of pendants and simple jewelry. Most of the senior ladies wore make-up and pearl earrings, but their eyes were filled with the unaccustomed dreams of a future so resplendent that I could see they were ready to slough off many of the old and pointless ways they had adopted while waiting merely for the impending cold and chill of death that was all they had, until this moment, seen as their future. Some were lifemates, their arms around each other, eager for a great adventure but, naturally, a bit suspicious that they, like millions of seniors before them, were the butts of a hoax or joke, something designed to part them from their life-savings. Still, they were willing to persevere to the bitter end, to put closure on the well-meaning friends who mocked them, earnest regarding their intentions to make new lives for themselves, prepared, however, to laugh off the "adventure" if they should be forced to return to their old lives and old ways, refusing, with dignity, to be victimized in an outlandish scam.

And there were so-called "bums" and "riff-raff", homeless men and women who had made it down to the park on the strength of dreams and rumors. They had no belongings and no attachments except that which accrued to them in the last moments before their new lives

began, sudden friendships sprouting out of nowhere and nothing, an offering of extra clothes and food from others who waited to join with them on the great adventure, a sharing of responsibilities and obligations as they, so long the objects of largesse and pity, became extenders of helping hands to the lame, the wheel-chair bound, the staggering and seizure-prone. I watched it with my own eyes as dirty hands reached out to push wheel-chairs forward through the crowd and carry little children of homeless mothers closer to the verge of the park where they could get a better view, if nothing else, of the great green statue's impassive eyes.

As the hour approached, many unfolded full page ads to make sure, one last time, that they hadn't misread anything or missed a double-entendre or hidden gimmick phrase:

WE AT THE TIMES DISCLAIM ALL RESPONSIBILITY FOR ANY AND

ALL REPERCUSSIONS DERIVING FROM INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES TO

THIS AD AND URGE ALL PERSONS TO REGARD THE FOLLOWING

WITH UTMOST SUSPICION:

HAD ENOUGH WITH THIS DYING PLANET AND THE DYING MINDS THAT RUN IT??? JOIN US IN A GREAT EXCURSION TO THE FRONTIER SETTLEMENT RECENTLY CONSTRUCTED ON THE PLANET MARS. FREE TRANSPORTATION, FREE HOUSING. A WORLD OF NECESSARY THINGS TO DO FOR ANY AND ALL WHO WISH TO START FRESH SOMEWHERE ELSE. NO RESTRICTIONS REGARDING AGE, RACE, CREED, NATIONAL ORIGIN, LEVEL OF DISABILITY, PRIOR EXPERIENCE. JOIN OTHER BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN BATTERY PARK, MANHATTAN, ON APRIL --, 199--, AT 12 NOON AND GET A NEW LEASE ON LIFE. CALL 1-800-GOF-ORIT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

As noon approached, most in the crowd were antsy to find out, once and for all, if some anonymous schmuck had made fools of them. But the look in their eyes of mutual dependence and compassion, of yearning to start fresh on a new world, was sufficient to take the sting out of potential deceit and turn the tables on any asshole trying to make light of their eagerness and their dreams.

Then, to the amazed cheers and delight of the gathered crowd, Moonstone brought the good ship, ROBERT A. WILSON, up from the depths of New York harbor right on schedule. It hovered noiselessly above the scummy water, an immense construct of metallic glare and shimmering light. A gangplank was lowered from the ship's hull and, as soon as it touched down on the verge of Battery Park, the waiting masses cheered and then proceeded to board in orderly unison, two by two, one simple step at a time.

I took up my position at the top of the gangplank, a clipboard in my hand. Mostly, I was just curious about the people who dared to make this journey, and wanted to greet them with as broad and welcoming a smile as possible. I didn't write a single note on my clipboard.

"Anything to declare?" I said to one young couple.

"I declare this spaceship's far fuckin' out!!!" said the man.

"Welcome aboard," I smiled back.

A homeless man seemed bleary-eyed with wonder, far more than he'd ever been with booze. He came up backwards, pulling a woman with severe CP up in a wheel-chair behind him.

"Anything to declare?" I said.

"Yeah. She's with me. I'll take care of her. You don't have to worry about no trouble with her. Just please don't send her back down."

I bent forward to look at the woman in the wheel-chair. She could say nothing but merely cried for the mystery of all that was happening to her.

"Welcome aboard, my friend," I said.

A young woman, her hair tied in a long braid, came up with a knapsack and a young puppy.

"Anything to declare?" I said.

"Just my stuff and my dog, Sweetie."

I petted the little bit of life and got well-licked for my interest.

"Y'know, she might get lonely on a planet with no other dogs," I said.

"Well, I thought about that, but I just couldn't leave without her. She'll always have me for a friend, if nothing else."

"She could do a hell of a lot worse. I'll bet, though, that there's another one just like her on board, only male. Interested?"

"Sure!"

"Then welcome aboard. I'll have First Officer Moonstone make sure that you two and the other puppy get together before long."

"Wow! That'd be great!"

She hurried up the gangplank, then turned back to me.

"See you on Mars," she said with a big smile.

And that's just a wee touch of how it went the day we loaded the ROBERT A. WILSON for its maiden voyage.

No one, it turned out, had to be turned away.

§

Don't think for a moment that the Feds sat idly by while the ROBERT A. WILSON took off on its mission without trying their damndest to stick their noses into what was none of their damn business. If it's not the IRS charting every curve in your colon, it's the FBI or CIA getting pissed off that you did something really spectacular without their getting wind of it.

But Moonstone and I were ready.

First, though, before take-off I had to have Moonstone put each newscaster and reporter in his own personal time-loop. It was really amusing to see them on the edge of the boarding throng unhitching their cameras and then suddenly unhitching their cameras again and then unhitching their cameras again and then unhitching their cameras again . . . By the time the cameras were mounted and notebooks and pens were at the ready, the ROBERT A. WILSON was long gone, somewhere between the LaGrange point and the moon's far side.

"What the fuck. . . ?" I happened to hear one of them moan, and they all scratched their heads in perplexity. They had seen the vehicle rise majestically out of the harbor, they remembered every scintilla of their initial amazement, and they remembered grabbing the tools

of their individual trades before running from their cars and network vans to badger me with questions. Then they recalled nothing, no launch, no lengthy boarding procedure, nothing.

I just leaned against the same pay-for-view binoculars, minding my own business. I made sure I was as inconspicuous as possible.

The whole town buzzed with the news of the take-off, but because the media who had flocked to the place saw nothing, they, in their chagrin and embarrassment, tried to write it all off as some form of mass hallucination. Naturally, I didn't try to educate them to the truth. The People knew, and that's all that mattered.

I took the subway uptown. The spaceship was manned by androids and robots of Moonstone's devising, as was the Martian city he had built for the Earthlings' new lives. He would tag along for awhile, he said, to make sure everything was in order, and then he'd be back home again in his mirror.

For the first time in days, the 800 number in my back room--fed through my modem from a data-link of Moonstone's creation--was silent. Then, as I kicked back in my chair waiting, it rang one final time.

"Yes, sir, Mr. President," I answered. "How's everything in the Beltway?"

There were dozens of them on the other end, including the President, and all were equally non-plussed that I was ready for them.

"Uh, is this . . . uh, a Mr. Shoki Shaula we're speaking to?" came a deep-voiced query. Obviously, the level of testosterone in that room in Washington, wherever it was, had been pumped up to the highest spy-catching level to keep me impressed.

"Shoki Shaula here," I said. "Put on the President."

That blew it for them. After some muted debate the President got on, sounding like someone who was paid to canvass me for magazine subscriptions.

"Well, Mr. Shaula," he said, "that was a very impressive demonstration you put on today."

"Thank you, Mr. President. To what are you referring?"

"Well, uh, the launching of that vehicle. That . . . that flying saucer."

"Flying saucer? I don't know what you're talking about, I'm sure. But as long as I've got you on the phone, I've been wanting to discuss your foreign and domestic policy for a long time. Have you got a minute?"

"Well, you see, Mr. Shaula, we didn't call you to discuss policy questions . . ."

"No? And here I was giving you credit for singlehandedly instituting a new form of grass roots survey to enhance the effectiveness of our governmental system. I guess I was mistaken."

"Well, yes, as much as we'd all love to enhance the mechanisms of democracy, you see, we called you to discuss the more immediate issue of your ad in the Times and the flying saucer that just got launched from New York harbor."

"Listen, pal . . . This must be some kind of crank call. I don't know anything about a flying saucer and I'll bet you're not even the President. So why don't you stop pestering taxpayers and call some other 800 number to waste their time!"

And I hung up. By the time the phone rang again, I was rolling on the floor, laughing so hard the tears streaked my cheeks. I picked up the receiver after catching my breath and said, gruffly, "Yeah?"

"Listen, you," came the voice of the President, who was obviously much pissed. "This is the President of the United States and I want some answers . . ."

"Fuck you," I said. "And don't try impersonating the President with me again, asshole! I'm a patriotic American!"

And I hung up.

The next time they called, the only message they received was, "We're sorry but this 800 number is no longer in service. . ."

§

"So Moonstone," I said, "do they like it up there?"

Moonstone grinned broadly, twisting a lock of his green hair.

"They seem to love it, Mr. Shaula," he said. "The androids take care of most of the technical work while they're teaching them to handle it, themselves. Everybody learns as much as he can when he can, and each one gravitates toward that aspect of social organization he finds most appealing. They pooled the books they brought into quite a library and volunteers are teaching the young ones to read and write. And the old ones, too. Many couldn't read. So they learn together and nobody's embarrassed that chronological age and grade level aren't quite synchronous."

"Ah, the virtues of frontier living . . ."

"Very true, Mr. Shaula. And those who were considered useless and helpless back here, the mentally retarded and the crippled and addicted, have become the focal points of whole regimens of co-operative services. Why, people take turns pushing wheel-chairs through the scenic galleries, and those who once could barely handle a fork and knife, themselves, are teaching others to use a fork and then a knife, one at a time. It's truly marvelous how they're getting along."

"And the senior citizens?"

Moonstone laughed out loud.

"They've got everybody dancing polkas and doing cross-stitch and learning to play mah-jongg. Many have taken over the hydroponics from the androids and are experimenting with hybridization. The most remarkable thing, I'd say, is the way the young are paying attention to what they have to say. See, they're telling them about things that matter to them all, not just playing out long-winded reminiscences about the events of their lost and regretted youth."

"Moonstone, you're very perceptive."

"Well, be that as it may, those seniors never looked so young."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Suddenly a transmission came over my computer monitor:

FREEDOM BASE TO EARTH MOTHER OVER

I typed in:

EARTH MOTHER TO FREEDOM BASE COME IN

Then:

JUST A NOTE TO THANK YOU FOR WHAT YOU DID. ALL LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEMS WORKING FINE. ANDROIDS FRIENDLY, A REGULAR RIOT WHEN YOU GET THEM GOING. NEW PROJECT THIS MONTH IS OBSERVATORY FOR FUTURE SOLAR SYSTEM EXPLORATION. HOPE TO SECURE VEHICLE FOR MARTIAN EXCURSIONS BUT MUST BE PATIENT. TAKE ONE DAY AT A TIME. THAT'S ALL FOR NOW. WILL WRITE HOME ONCE IN A WHILE TO KEEP YOU POSTED. OVER.

I typed in:

YOU ARE HOME. CONGRATULATIONS. KEEP THE FAITH, BABY. OVER.

AND OUT.

The monitor went blank. My off-mode program kicked in and I watched bursts of fireworks arc and flash in fifty different colors. My mind drifted happily among thoughts of the new world that was being created a few hundred million miles down the road.

"The man who sent you that message, Mr. Shaula," said Moonstone, "a week ago he was an alcoholic living in a downtown shelter. He volunteered to be part of the communications team and he even started the first AA group up there. They have their meetings and then, afterwards, they play mah-jongg and do cross-stitch."

Moonstone paused and stared at me with those big moist eyes of his.

"I thought you should know that," he said.

I couldn't say much at first. Then I said back, "Thank you, Moonstone. I appreciate you telling me." I paused again, at a loss for words. Then I said, "I wish I could reach into that mirror and shake your hand."

"I understand, Mr. Shaula," Moonstone replied. "The feeling's mutual."

I was about to go out for a walk when I remembered.

"And what about that puppy named Sweetie?" I asked.

"As per your instructions, she has a cloned friend named, what was it now, Sparky, I think the woman called her, and a breeding mate named Balthazar. They're identical triplets, now."

There. The last string was tied. I grabbed my hat and stick and went for a walk in Cherry Park.

It was a beautiful afternoon.

<§>

9.

THE BOUQUET

With Earth Day just around the corner, I was struck by several unique and radical approaches to dealing with some of our planet's more virulent woes. These ideas came to me while I strolled through Riverside Park, taking in the river breezes and all the abundant lightness of the frilly leafbuds on the trees. Even in a labyrinth of concrete and reinforced steel like Manhattan there were woodpeckers and goldfinches in the parks, and the delightfully defiant call of a mockingbird greeted me from a tall elm. I resolved to take action and, picking up my pace and twirling my stick with renewed vigor, I performed my usual medley of Man of La Mancha tunes and made my way back to my apartment.

The only sunlight came from flecks of mica imbedded in the retaining wall across the alley, but that was ok, a simple man can be happy with whatever cards he's dealt. My pets--the dogs, the birds, the ferret, the cats, the dignified squirmy-crawlie things in their cages--seemed to have springtime injected into their blood, and they leaped for me to tussle with them, rub them even more vigorously than usual. And they all wanted out.

I threw open the fire-escape window and wedged the front door open with a piece of wood I had cut for that purpose. A breeze redolent of stone and moss and dusty sunlight swept the place clean, taking with it stale thoughts, old heartaches and several winter disillusionments. My animals, well-liked by my neighbors, ran into the hallway and charged each other in pointless combats and giddy, relentless circles. Some made their way up and down the stairs but that was ok, they'd work their way back into my place soon enough, when they were all sniffed out.

"Moonstone!" I called out, tossing my hat and stick on the frayed couch. "We've got work to do. Man, do I have some wild ideas! Sometimes I amaze myself with the audacity of the things I made you do."

I turned on the monitor in the back room and then noticed for the first time that Moonstone wasn't in his mirror.

My blood chilled. "Moonstone?" I called out to my own reflection. Not yet I thought to myself, there's so much left to be done . . .

As much as I kept in the forefront of my mind that Moonstone wasn't going to be with me forever, that even the wondrous Solomon lost his Asmodeus to the vagaries of chance and circumstance, I was suddenly deluged with recriminations. I should've done this, I should've done that, I could've been more radical in my approach from the very beginning and not, instead, soliloquized with Hamlet that conscience had made a coward of me, too: all the self-deprecating feelings I promised I wouldn't indulge in when the time came, consumed me in one fell swoop, in a matter of mere seconds.

And then Moonstone appeared.

"Thank God!" I groaned, assuming the elbow-to-table-head-on-hand stance of a Talmudic scholar who has just philosophized his way out of incontrovertible atheism. "Have a rough night?"

"No, Mr. Shaula," Moonstone said. "I'm ok."

His voice was lifeless. I looked him over closely and what I saw wasn't good.

"What's up, Moonstone?" I said. "You look like shit."

His gaze was listless, no longer fervent or forthright. His green hair and young beard lacked luster. Even his green cheeks seemed sunken, as if he hadn't eaten whatever it was he ate for days.

"Mr. Shaula, I tell you I'm ok."

"Have it your way, Moonstone," I said. "I'm at a disadvantage in that I have no idea what sort of symptoms demons, or angels, exhibit when they're ill. If you look depressed and off your feed to me, and I seem worried about your mental and/or physical health, don't give it a second thought. I mean, just because I consider you my friend, my comrade-in-arms, the brother, if you will, that I never had, that's ok. I'll just bite my tongue and keep my opinions to myself."

"You have a brother, Mr. Shaula. Remember? He lives out on the West Coast."

Nothing slips past Moonstone. "That's not the point," I said, somewhat embarrassed. "But never mind. Don't tell me what's eating you. I'll mind my own business."

I turned away from the mirror and pretended to skim Arrian's Campaigns of Alexander. It bothered me that I was indulging in the early-middle-age-male version of a pout, but some situations required drastic measures.

"Ok, ok," Moonstone said finally, "I suppose you're the one person in the universe who can understand my problem."

"Now you're talking, Moonstone. I like challenges. What's the matter?"

"Mr. Shaula, I think I'm in love."

Earth's biosphere wasn't getting any cleaner, but right then I needed to take Moonstone for a long walk. The best I could manage, however, under the circumstances was to pack his mirror in a side-slung sack and make my way back to Riverside Park. My personal idiosyncrasy when contemplating affairs of the heart is to keep my body in motion. When my heart's been broken and the tears are streaming down my cheeks, I chuck all shame to the winds and start walking. When I'm in the midst of a torrid love affair and all the world sings with one magical voice that the ills and woes of mankind are miraculously balanced out by the power of love, I take to the streets like a troubadour, whistling and singing to beat the band. Love, to my way of thinking, is not to be seriously understood in the study or the cloister, no, not even the love of God, although that is a different matter entirely. Love is best understood amidst flux and change, with the scents and sights of life passing by in all its sudden and random elegance.

So, mirror in sack, we hit the road.

A young Spanish couple passed us in Cherry Park. They held hands and were deeply engaged in conversation, their eyes riveted on each other. I said out loud, "One thing about love among my people, Moonstone, is that it's usually accompanied by prolonged eye contact, and that a sure sign of waning interest is that eye contact becomes infrequent and unsustained. Does she look deeply into your eyes when you hang out together?"

I heard his gentle voice in my mind say, "O no, Mr. Shaula, we couldn't do that. Her eyes are like two stars exploding, twin beams of limitless, radiant energy. If our eyes ever met, I'd be blinded in an instant."

Jesus Christ, I thought to myself, this isn't going to be easy. "Moonstone," I said, "maybe you better tell me what she looks like. That way I can get a better handle on your problem."

We stood in front of Butterfield's statue. A pigeon eyed me critically while it flexed its tail-feathers and dropped white mush on the old warrior's head.

"She lives imbedded in a matrix of silicon and carbon atoms somewhere in middle of what your people call the Crab Nebula," Moonstone said. "The totality of her form is reflected from each face of a crystal lattice that extends for about one light year in all directions. The radiance from her eyes radiates throughout her entire being. I can know her only one lattice at a time, and each angle of perception produces an image that is at once identical and totally unique. It's hard, if not impossible, to explain without having her here before us."

"Hmm," I mused. "She sounds like quite a woman," I said dubiously.

"She's magnificent!"

"I'm sure, Moonstone. I don't doubt it for a minute."

We crossed the upper drive and strolled along the freeform mosaic benches at Grant's Tomb. Community residents were given the opportunity to design the mosaics, themselves, so there were benches with dinosaur families and flowers and colorful city skylines and people of many races playing games together and even a bench that I designed and executed which I dubbed at the time, "Great Moments in Witchcraft," consisting of Ain Soph's creation of the World and the Shekinah appearing before Moses and Demeter's giving birth to the Spring.

I contemplated my landmark with a critical eye, noting the play of sunlight from each colored tile to the other. I still liked it.

I said to Moonstone, "Does this girlfriend of yours do anything like, uh, hold hands?"

"O no, that's impossible, Mr. Shaula. I mean, well, she really doesn't have hands to hold."

I shook my head. "Mind if I ask how you met this uh young lady?"

"When I'm not with you on active duty, Mr. Shaula, I just sort of wander."

"You wander?"

"Yes, I wander."

"I see."

We wandered.

We stopped across the street from the massive portico of Riverside Cathedral. Saints and gargoyles and prophets carved in granite formed protective aureoles for the bronze doors. Somehow I envisioned Moonstone's romance to be something akin to a passionate involvement with one of those statues.

"Have you ever spoken to her, Moonstone?" I asked.

"O, all the time. In my mind, the way you and I are talking right now."

"I see," I said, stroking my beard. "And does she uh talk back?"

"Well, not exactly."

"Why don't you elaborate."

"Hmm. It's just that she reads my mental words the way she reads the solar winds from the million stars in her vicinity. My voice, if you will, is just one single note in the prolonged symphony of space dancing through her mind."

"Then she doesn't respond to you directly when you speak to her?"

"No, not exactly."

"Well, what does exactly happen?"

I could hear the rapturous smile in Moonstone's voice: "She trembles a little."

"I see: she trembles."

"Just a little bit. Just a little tiny quiver deep down in the crystal matrix of her being. But that little tremble makes my heart soar!"

"Hmm. She trembles."

We kept walking.

"I'm afraid, Moonstone, that you're not giving me much to work with. Human beings aren't nearly as subtle or sophisticated in their mechanisms of love."

We walked along the stone hexagons bordering the park in silence awhile. At last Moonstone said, "I know, Mr. Shaula. But I really appreciate you trying to help me out, anyway. Even though it's hopeless."

"Now, now, no time for self-pity. True love always seems hopeless at first. That's because the void between beings seems endless. I'll admit you've carried the situation to an extreme, but never give up. Love will conquer all!"

Of course I said that for Moonstone's benefit, not having the foggiest notion how he could extricate himself from his emotional quandary. That's when we happened to pass the monkey bars and

swings and I saw a little dark-haired girl hand her mother one of the first blooming dandelions which she had pulled out from between a crack in the hexagonal stones.

"That's it!" I fairly shouted, drawing the bemused attention of everybody within 25 feet. I lowered my voice. "We've got to do something to get a rise out of your girlfriend, something above and beyond what she gets from all those suns and their solar winds. We've got to get you noticed, my little friend!"

"And how do I do that?"

"No problem, Moonstone. You're going to give her a bouquet of flowers."

§

Back in my place the computer belched out the complete listing of Superfund sites, the worst toxic environmental nightmares in our nation. I passed the list onto Moonstone along with a copy of Graf's Exotica, Luer's Native Orchids of the United States, and the Audubon Guide to Wildflowers.

"You and I are going to tackle a couple of problems at once," I said. "What you need to do first is visit each of these toxic dumps and transform every last atom of crap and scuz into flowers."

"'Crap and scuz'?" Moonstone's big eyes widened.

"Yes. You'll know what I mean when you get there by the smell. Flowers smell one way, crap and scuz smell completely different."

"I see."

"Use these books for templates when you create the flowers. Don't stint on variety. Be munificent. After all, you're in love."

"Ok."

"Good. Now, once all the Superfund sites are no longer toxic but are, instead, gardens of sensual delights, pick an assortment of flowers whose mutual forms, colors and fragrances seem to you to be singularly wonderful. Now, I know this will be a subjective judgment call, but that's what love's all about."

"Ok."

"Good. Now, you transform the flowers you've especially picked for the occasion into crystal matrices analogous to your uh girlfriend's being. Make sure the lattices match and the nodes each correspond exactly to her angular configurations."

"Buy why, Mr. Shaula?"

"So that once you've gathered together all those floral crystals into one cosmic bouquet, you can bring them up to her and stick them right in!"

"Stick them in her?"

"Of course," I said nonchalantly, leaning back in my chair with my feet up on the computer and my hands linked behind my head. "That's what love's all about. Trust me."

§

"O Mr. Shaula, she trembled, O how hard and deeply she trembled when I presented her with the bouquet!" Moonstone beamed at me from the mirror. His eyes glittered again and his green flesh seemed fulsome and robust.

"Hey, Moonstone," I said, "would I steer you wrong?"

In fact, I was on the verge of trembling, myself. The papers were full of the Earth Day "miracle" and at least 38 religious sects held vigils around the country promising God that His/Her largesse would not be forgotten and that future contamination would be stopped immediately. Unfortunately, the corporate wizards who churned out the mess didn't quite know how to pull the plug, God or no, and so fresh crap and scuz has continued to stifle the flowers' growth as I write these very words.

However, a little time has been bought so mankind's wisdom can catch up with God's miracles.

And Moonstone, well, he's been the happiest of demons and continues, as I write these words, to present his lady friend with bouquets. And just yesterday he almost popped out of the mirror in his eagerness to show me what he held in his hand:

"She gave me this," he said, holding out a radiant crystal lump which flashed warmly in a thousand colors.

"Moonstone," I said, "you've got yourself quite a woman."

<§>

11. *MIRACLES*

The Lithuanian dawn was a series of horizontal bands of magenta, purple, and deep cranberry. By directing my line of sight just enough to block out the hills and farmland spread out before me and staring directly into the streaked sunrise, I could imagine I was floating in space above the banded clouds of the planet Jupiter. It was a pleasant, somewhat giddy feeling but, after a few moments, I turned my attention back to the real world.

An old farmer walked beside a cart full of potatoes pulled by a rather vigorous mule. Judging by the way the farmer talked to the mule and stroked his flanks and back, it was apparent that the two of them had grown very close and chummy, depending as they did upon each other for mutual survival in a world where the political deck was (as usual among those who lived close to the land) stacked against them.

As per my instructions, Moonstone had planted me way out in the Lithuanian boondocks. I stood beside the rutted dirt road, waiting patiently for the first farmer to pass by on his way to market. Next to me was the pump.

The old man and his mule slowed as they approached, both of them sniffing the air with suspicion. When they finally drew up next to me, they stopped, the old man giving me the once-over with his canny farmer's eyes.

I tipped my hat.

Thanks to Moonstone I spoke perfect Lithuanian:

"Good morning, sir. This pump you see here is a gift to the people of Lithuania from an anonymous donor. The donor wishes to promote your struggle for freedom and self-determination and, in order to achieve this end, has provided you with a natural gas pipeline that will never run dry. Please inform your people of this gift and may you use it in the spirit in which it is given."

I smiled at the bewildered old man and handed him my card (herein translated from the Lithuanian):

FREEDOM RESOURCES INC.

Then I faded away.

§

Jesus Castro pulled an ear of corn off the stalk, then jumped back a full pace. A second mature ear had appeared in its place. Slowly, with extreme caution, he broke off the second ear and a third grew back immediately from the same stalk. He mumbled something religious, then experimented with a different ear of corn with identical results.

I stepped up to Jesus Castro from among tall cornstalks with my hat in one hand and my card in the other. I took him by surprise, eliciting more of a gurgle than a gasp, and, had he not been frozen to the earth in terror, he would, I'm sure, have run like hell.

"Good morning, sir," I said in perfect Spanish. "This field of corn is a gift from an anonymous donor to all of your fellow countrymen. It will feed as many people as are hungry in your country. See to it that this gift is used in the spirit in which it is given."

I took his trembling hand and placed the card in the palm:

Then I faded away.

§

I walked up to a cluster of people huddled together in a makeshift hut somewhere in the hill country between the Ethiopian rebels and the government forces. The hot air mingled with the stench of death reminded me of some of the Manhattan boiler rooms I had the misfortune to work in during my handyman days.

I appeared to them out of nowhere and their wide eyes gave full evidence of their terror. But they were too weak and ill to move very much, and, besides, where could they run?

I looked at each one closely, straight in the eye. Then I walked up to a skeletal boy plagued by a fly that seemed to walk freely up one nostril and back down the other. The boy was too weak to brush the fly away.

I held out a bowl of gruel. It tasted like honey, butter and baked oats.

"Go on," I said in perfect Ethiopian. "Eat."

The boy scooped a palmful into his mouth and smiled. The others drew closer. I picked up several gourds and empty cans from the scattered refuse in the area and filled each one with the gruel from the bowl.

The bowl never emptied.

"Good day," I said, tipping my hat. "This bowl of food is a gift from an anonymous donor. It will feed as many people as are hungry in your country. Please see to it that it is used in the spirit in which it is given."

By now the ravenous family was scrambling for the food, and others were hurrying over from not far away to see what all the commotion was.

I gently took hold of the eldest woman's wrinkled hand and pressed my card into it:

FREEDOM RESOURCES INC.

Then I faded away.

§

The last part of the experiment was the trickiest. The timing had to be just right, that is, I had to make use of a moment of sufficient drama for the stagecraft to work. This meant I had to bide my time. Unfortunately, however, I knew that with things the way they were on the West Bank, I wouldn't have to wait very long.

Sure enough, it was only a day and a half before they were facing off with rocks on one side and automatic weapons on the other.

I have to give the Little Green Wonder his due: he did me up well.

Just as this Palestinian mother was desperately going to wing a rock the size of a ziz's egg right into the soldier's face-plate, I materialized overhead in an aureole of ruby and gold light. I told Moonstone to make me look like the shekinah, itself, which he thought about awhile, nodding his head back and forth and squinting out secret images known only to himself for inspiration, and came up with

the assorted robes, symbols and scrolls with which I encountered the two angry mobs. Not only that, he had me appear in a chariot of carved flames with Elijah on my right and Mohammed on my left.

Of course, he let me keep my hat. I was rather firm on that score. So, as I descended from the chariot to the mobs' mutual consternation and overwhelming awe, I tipped my hat to the crowd in general and to the mother, in particular. I extracted the rock from her frozen fist and walked to a patch of bare ground between the enemies. I knelt down, dug a shallow hole and planted the rock.

Within seconds the ground shook and cracked and a huge tree uncurled gnarled and glistening limbs from the barren land. The bark was an impressive casting of deep sapphire flecked with opal highlights and the foliage seemed like green and silver tinsel that tinkled together like tiny bells as the branches unfolded outward and the trunk swelled majestically to the sky.

The branches were laden with sweet fruit resembling jade apricots.

As if at a single signal, the enemies dropped to their knees. Rocks and guns fell to the ground.

I pulled two fruits off the same branch and gave one to the mother and the other to the soldier she'd been aiming for. Depending on which side of the tracks you were raised, each fruit was inscribed on the flesh in either Hebrew or Arabic:

KNOWLEDGE

I addressed the crowd from beneath the floating chariot of flames:

"An anonymous donor has sent me to bring you this tree and to tell you it's ok now to eat from it. All of you. It will feed as many of you as have the simple faith to reach out and take a fruit. I guarantee you'll enjoy it."

I stepped over to the awestruck and now-weeping mother and pressed my card into the same palm that had held the rock:

FREEDOM RESOURCES INC.

Then I stepped back to the vicinity of the chariot, each flame above me crackling like a snapped dry twig. "Go ahead," I said. "Dig in!"

Then I floated back up into the chariot and the whole mishegoss faded away.

§

Back with my legs up staring at the fractal generator program, I had to listen to Moonstone go on and on about my creative use of his powers and how happy he was that, through me, he would be able to witness a pervasive and healthy change in a social structure of an entire planet.

"Freedom, Mr. Shaula," he said, "religious bigotry and ageless vendettas, hunger: O I can see all of it, very clearly now. You're attacking social and political evil in all its forms and, well, I'm proud to say that I was the vehicle that enabled you to make it all happen. I can't tell you how pleased I am, Mr. Shaula."

I sighed.

"Moonstone, Moonstone, Moonstone," I said. "You're still naive in spite of hanging around me all these months. You don't think that anything's going to change because of what I've done, do you? Please, Moonstone: too many people have a vested interest in keeping this world as fucked-up as it is. No, what you've seen so far is just Phase 1 of an experiment in transformational psychology. Phase 2 is where the real action's gonna be. So far, I've just moved their game onto my chessboard. I've realized

that I can't play the game in their court with their rules: I have no political skills, no patience, too many personal idiosyncracies. So, like any astute general, I simply shifted the battle onto my chosen turf."

Moonstone was wide-eyed and thunderstruck.

"Mr. Shaula," he said, "sometimes you amaze me."

"Well, thank you, Moonstone," I said. "I guarantee you that the feeling's mutual. Now, it remains to be seen if I've got brains enough to pull this off. Remember, it's all an experiment that's as likely to fail as succeed. Now look," and I held out a sealed envelope, "this has my predictions written inside. In a couple of days we'll see if I was right and then we'll go on to Phase 2."

I put the envelope in front of Moonstone's mirror.

"No peeking, now," I said.

§

"So what've you been doing lately?" I asked my friend Harry.

He leaned against the fire-escape rail across from me, smoking a joint.

"Man, there's this killer hill," he said. "It runs uphill at a good 35° for over half a mile. At the top there's a Carmelite nunnery made of cut stones, that looks like a castle. I'm trying to make it all the way up without having to walk my bike. I can make it about 3/4 of the way, but then I've had it. I'm ready to puke. Spots spin in front of my eyes. But there's something so wild about the trip down that makes it all worthwhile. Flying past this medieval castle... the rush of air... the kick of free-fall... that little taste of fear in the back of your mind that maybe, this time, the brakes won't hold at the bottom . . ."

I could tell by the half-smile almost hidden under his immense mustache that he was really tasting those fond memories.

"It must be nice having the bread to spend that kind of time in the country," I said.

"You're not kiddin'. I've been broke too long. When that movie deal followed right on the heels of the six-figure advance, I almost shit my pants. So it's the woods for me, pal. Fresh air. Hawks. Raccoons raiding the bird feeders at night. A sky with real stars in it, not airplanes or dirigibles with lightbulbs underneath selling some politician to me or the hazy glow from all the damn lights. Up north, the only lights that move are satellites, shooting stars and ufos. You can even see the Milky Way. I never knew what the Milky Way looked like before, except from pictures. And when a few planets line up at night, you can actually feel that you're standing on an immense ball, looking out at other immense balls shining sunlight back at you. Yeah, give me the country, anyday . . ."

"So how come you come back here every weekend?" I asked ingenuously.

"Shit," said Harry, "a man's gotta have some decadence in his life. You don't wanna be too healthy."

He held out the joint.

"No thanks," I said.

"You've gotta be kiddin'," he said, surprised.

"I'm in the middle of . . . a major project. I've got to keep my head clear."

"Suit yourself." Harry toked then snuffed it out, putting the remainder in his pocket. "What kind of project?"

"Well," I said, "it's kind of hard to explain."

"I can imagine. Look at all the nutty things happening around the world: goddamn miracles. It's gotta have something to do with the missing ozone layer or the water. Maybe it's radiation from tv sets that you and I've been absorbing all our lives."

"Who knows?"

"That's for damn sure. Nobody knows. Some of those Fundamentalists who've been waiting for the end of the world are heartbroken that things are starting to look too good. Then there's the atheists and the existentialists who are feeling pretty uneasy that a hand other than Chance's seems to be at work around this place."

"Then there's the sci-fi freaks who just know it's got to be aliens setting us up for the Great Lesson," I said.

"You got it," said Harry. "Or the horror freaks who smell Cthulu at the bottom of it."

"You think it could be demons?" I asked, staring Harry right in the eyes.

"Who the hell knows? I tell you, that bit with the chariot and the Tree of Knowledge, that was inspired. And those business cards, Freedom Resources Inc: if I didn't think it was impossible, I'd bet it was some American yuppie mind-fucking the world."

"Don't be so parochial," I said. "The Japanese are big on business cards."

"Big on demons, too. Maybe it is a demon, after all. Trying to con us with good deeds."

"Maybe," I said. I was watching an alleycat hunch against the stone alley wall and spray backwards. "Maybe it's just some lunatic with Aladdin's lamp and he doesn't know what the fuck to do with it."

The alleycat rubbed up against the stone wall and groaned a throaty wail.

"Well if that's the case," said Harry, taking a sniff at the fragrant alley-night air, "let's hope he doesn't fuck up."

"Harry, you're absolutely right. And you know something? You're going to make it up that mountain."

Yeah?"

"Yeah. If God didn't want you to make it up that mountain, He wouldn't have sent you to live so close to it."

§

I opened up the envelope in front of the mirror.

"What did I tell you?" I said. "The church won't let them eat the corn because the business card didn't say 'Jesus Christ' and so it's got to be the work of the devil; that fascist pig dictator absconds with the bowl as if he didn't have enough to eat and hangs onto it like it's some sort of voodoo fetish; the people who've eaten the fruit of the tree are going back to their people with sane and sensible ideas for peace and mutual respect, so the rest of them that didn't eat any are now avoiding it like poison, again the work of the devil. And the Russians simply walked in and nabbed the pump. No one gets to go near it. The end. Game, set, match."

"It's very disheartening," Moonstone concurred.

"Well, little guy, it's not like they took us by surprise. Actually, they played right into my hands. Now we're on the battlefield of our choice, just like Alexander the Great would've arranged it."

I switched the monitor from fractal generator to my program, Phase 2.

"It's people who fuck things up, Moonstone. Not the 'tides of history' or 'Original Sin' or some mystical cycle of ages. It's people. Nasty, ill-thinking, tormented, greedy, self-absorbed assholes who can't leave the rest of us alone to enjoy life. There's not many of them, Moonstone. Not in relation to the rest of us. But those miracles got them agitated. They're lying awake now, some in their palaces and halls of state, some in their mansions, some in their penthouses, some even stretched out in the gutter or burying themselves under cardboard boxes to shield them from drafts: all of them, Moonstone, are feeling their bowels clench tonight, filled with the kind of acid fear that can etch stone."

I scrolled the program and motioned from the monitor to Moonstone.

"Tonight, Moonstone, you and I will become seismographs of the human heart. We're on a search-and-destroy mission."

"Destroy?" His moist eyes widened.

"Well, maybe 'destroy' is a little strong. Let's call it 'search-and-transmute.'"

§

Vignette 1

PETER THE GREAT AND THE SLEEPER

P the G: What's the matter with you? Those people need to be let loose. Have you learned nothing from history? If the Americans had simply let the South secede the blacks would have risen and taken their freedom with the strength of their genius and their determination and the righteousness of their cause. Yes, blood would be shed and copiously, but in the end, the northern whites and southern blacks would have mutual respect. The blacks would have taken, for themselves, their full freedoms, and not have been denigrated by the conditional and hypocritical 'granting' of it by those who never believed their own lies. No, it is time to free mother Russia from such grumbling, and be to those lesser nations a Great Protector, a wise grandfather who knows how to let others live out their own destinies.

SLEEPER: But there are those who will emasculate me for showing weakness . . .

P the G: I am taking care of them tonight. Have no fears. You will rule and live to be beloved by the people of the world.

SLEEPER: I would like to believe that, but how do I know I can trust you?

P the G: How dare you, mortal! I am no politician. I am Peter the Great!

§

Vignette 2

THE DEVIL AND THE DICTATOR

DEVIL: You worry more over slaves' gruel than over kingly feasts. Why did you steal that bowl?

DICTATOR: Aaah!! It's you!! The horror!! the horror!

DEVIL: Why did you steal that bowl? Haven't you enough to eat?

DICTATOR: Master! I have dreamed of this moment . . .

DEVIL: Why, then, do you tremble and sweat?

DICTATOR: It is your horrid magnificence! I can't bear it!

DEVIL: Why, then, did you steal the bowl?

DICTATOR: I knew there was demon magic in it. I wanted it for myself, that I might summon you.

DEVIL: I am here.

DICTATOR: I cannot speak. My thoughts are jumbled by your presence.

DEVIL: You wish to rule a world and be worshipped as a god.

DICTATOR: Yes! I want no more than that.

DEVIL: (Holds up a gold ball) In this golden sphere is a world tucked deeply within the crevices of its own vast universe. It is just like the universe we are in at this moment, encased within its own golden sphere. The world of which I am speaking is a world of slaves. You will find all that you desire in that place, for that world of slaves has no ruler and they clamor for one.

DICTATOR: But I want to rule in this world!!!

DEVIL: In this world, freedom is in the very air, it is imbibed with each breath of the lungs. There is a genetic predisposition among the creatures of this world to be free. You will never be truly happy in this world. Trust me.

DICTATOR: Of course, Majesty. Your word is my law.

DEVIL: Then realize your dreams. Enter this sphere and rule a whole world. Be worshipped as sa god.

(The DICTATOR, an expression of bliss upon his face, begins to fade.)

Never be found upon this world again!

§

Vignette 3

THE WRAITH AND THE RABBI

RABBI: They eat of the fruit and gurgle and coo like fools.

WRAITH: They had no such tree in Brooklyn, and yet now, you will not eat.

RABBI: There is a force in this universe much greater than wisdom.

WRAITH: And what is that?

RABBI: Hatred!

WRAITH: Great hatred is born of great shame. What is your shame?

RABBI: I? I have no shame . . .

WRAITH: What is your shame?

RABBI: (Breaking down) All right! All right! If you must hear it from my own lips, my people are my shame! The good people, the gentle people, the people who obeyed all the laws, maintained all the covenants, were the ones who walked their children, hand-in-hand, to the cattlecars. Instead of dying with their rigid fingers plucking out Aryan eyes, they allowed the hope of God which flamed in their hearts to bury them. The thieves and gangsters and gutter pimps made it through the war unscathed, knifing their way to America or like resilient rats found the world to be one vast and universal gutter, ripe for their schemes and wickedness. To hell with goodness, then, and gentleness, and the hope of God! Our survival in this heartland of our enemies will purge our race of its shame. That is our only redemption. Not the fruit of the Tree.

WRAITH: Your anger is too hot for your survival. You will burn down like a flame on its wick, leaving nothing to posterity but a cinder and a hardened puddle of wax. You will be trampled upon by those who come after, the humble, the good, and the gentle, and they will not remember the cause of your anger or the course of the days of your life. There is a better way.

RABBI: As you are sent by God to enlighten me, I command you to tell me!

WRAITH: I shall make of you a sun, a star of special fire and magnitude, and I shall set you in the heavens as a sign for eternity to all who crawl upon this earth that your anger made you transcend the gravity of this place... (The RABBI, clutching himself in the ecstasy of his rage, begins to fade.) And the flames of your anger shall be eternal testament that their nature must have no dealings with this living earth, this place of flux and forgiveness . . .

Vignette 4

THE BISHOP AND THE STIGMATA

BISHOP: Holy Lord Jesus! (Looks at his hands and feet and side, suddenly grown excruciatingly painful) Wounds! My Christ, they bleed! And look, now, the flesh congeals all around them, forming lips!

STIGMATA: I suffered and died that all mankind might remember we are of the same flesh, the same blood. What hurts one, hurts all. What heals one, heals all. Let our brothers and sisters eat their fill of the corn.

BISHOP: But gratification without suffering and labor is the work of the devil . . .

STIGMATA: I suffered and died that all mankind might remember we are of the same flesh, the same blood. What hurts one, hurts all. What heals one, heals all. Let our brothers and sisters eat their fill of the corn . . .

§

And on and on. One by one Moonstone and I transmuted them, watched them become someone new, or hurled them elsewhere. The world needed to be made ripe for more miracles.

It was, all said and done, quite a week. When it was all accomplished, I left the now-stale air of my back room and, with Isis, my pet rat, riding my shoulder, stepped out of the building into air that was fresher, sweeter, and somehow evocative of new beginnings.

<§>

12. *THE FLOCK*

I walked into Malcolm Boetes' office with his letter of invitation in my hand. He stood up halfway and motioned me to sit in the chair in front of his desk.

"You're Malcolm Boetes?" I asked. "The guy who sent me this letter?"

"I am," he said, smiling, looking me straight in the eyes.

We shook hands. His grip intrigued me. Not too tight, trying to prove his manhood, and yet not in any way slack or wanting in enthusiasm. It was, however, non-committal: it could either have been a mere formality with him, shaking my hand; or it could have been a shamanic invitation to blood brotherhood. A very intriguing handshake.

"You knew I wouldn't pass up the opportunity to satisfy my curiosity," I said.

"You couldn't," he smiled back.

The seat massaged my ass and upper back with leather fists. He leaned back in his own plush seat and linked his fingers behind his head.

"Allow me to satisfy that curiosity immediately," he began. "My name is, indeed, Malcolm Boetes, and I asked you here tonight for a rather unique experience. I am offering you the secret of eternal youth."

I looked at his all polished and shiny face and the neatly trimmed white hair and the pale blue eyes of a Mormon scoping out a convert. Then I stood up again, picked up my hat and said, "Thank you, it's been good to know you." And I made for the door.

"Please wait," he said. "Hear me out. Behind my abrupt presentation lies a worthy proposition."

I stood and looked at my watch, smiling at Boetes in turn.

"You've got less than a minute, I said.

"Mr. Shaula, I am a biogenetic engineer of some considerable skill. I am also deeply concerned about the ecological condition of this planet and the direction in which the human society seems to be evolving. Some years ago I decided to take an active part in defending this planet against the ravages of overpopulation and industrialization. After years of research, I discovered two biochemical elixirs: the Elixir of Death, better known as the HIV virus; and its antidote, the Elixir of Life. Would you care, now, to sit back in your seat?"

There he was, all smiles and sincerity, looking me right in the eye, just like an insurance salesman.

I sat down.

"You did what?" I said.

"The Elixir of Death is already let loose upon the world. I can assure you that as it progresses geometrically among the human species, none of us who has not shared with me the Elixir of Life will survive. I've invited you to my office to give you that opportunity to survive."

I could hardly say I was flattered.

"You're out of your mind," I said.

"Mr. Shaula, one injection of my Elixir of Life is all it takes to not only protect you from the ravages of AIDS but will, as well, enhance your immunological system to the degree that it will be as much improved as it would be diminished by the HIV virus, itself. It will quickly destroy any foreign substances in your body, it will eliminate any and all tumors you might be developing, and it will revivify and rejuvenate each and every organic system in your body."

He smiled, paused, pressed the tips of his fingers together.

"The South African government paid for my research. I told them I would tag the virus to Negroes, in a manner similar to sickle-cell anemia. Money was no object. Of course, their faith in me was unfounded. My work was never motivated by racial considerations, but by logic and ecological necessity."

He leaned forward with his elbows on his desk.

"My research was successful beyond my wildest imaginings. You see, if this planet is to survive as a biosphere, there can be no more than 100 million people living on it. Regrettably, there is no getting around this truth. Believe me, I tried. I am neither callous nor indifferent to the sufferings of my fellow men: I simply have had to steel myself to do what must be done."

Boetes stood up and extracted a crystal grail from an ornate cabinet. It was half-full of a raspberry-colored fluid.

"The brighter side of my research, however," he said, "was the discovery of the Elixir of Life. The same biochemical forces that produce the lethality of HIV, when reversed, produce

what could very well amount to immortality: eternal life and eternal youth. I decided, once I was certain of my results, that I would begin the daunting process of ensuring that 100 million individuals would survive the coming plague."

He held the crystal grail out to me.

"I have my own methods for selecting those who are to begin spreading the blessing of the Elixir of Life. You have been chosen. It is not important why. Once you have drunk the Elixir, you will have the privilege of selecting anyone else to drink as well. The virtues of the Elixir will thus spread geometrically, and, as the rest of our rivals for space on this planet die out, we will survive to start our civilization afresh."

He waited for me to reach for the grail, smiling. But his eyes were penetratingly non-committal.

I think he was giving me the Final Exam.

"You did what!" I said, standing up and clapping my hat on my head. "Buddy, if what you're saying is true, you're out of your fucking mind!"

I stormed out his office door and didn't even wait for the leather-appointed elevator: I hopped my ass down the concrete stairs.

§

I had my next conversation with Moonstone while standing somewhere in Morocco amidst a flock of flamingoes.

That's the way it had been going, lately. I was growing restless. It wasn't enough to lurk in my back room with my co-conspirator and my computer, working out diverse methods for changing the world. I had Moonstone transport us to some of the most bizarre locales on earth, just so I could think out loud with him, use him for a sounding board for ideas and schemes and fancies which seemed to be growing increasingly outlandish. It was as if I needed to be completely physically immersed in environments which were, themselves, outlandish and alien to anything within my limited experience, in order to assist my ideas to evolve fruitfully.

But a flock of flamingos in Morocco -- !

In order to see my little friend, I had to keep his mirror tilted away from the broiling sun. Never before had I wanted to trade in my faithful hat for something else, but an Arab burnoose would have suited me just fine right about then. The flamingos paid no attention to me and my mirror but simply kept on with whatever it was they did in the daily rhythm for survival: twining their necks in courtship rituals, regurgitating food for their herded young, monitoring the perimeters of their flock for hungry invaders.

"Moonstone," I said, "look at these creatures. They're called flamingos and they have to be some of the most ungainly, weird-looking lifeforms ever to grace a biosphere."

I pointed the mirror around the flock so Moonstone could take a good look.

"That's the way life is," I continued. "A profusion of trial-and-error, a series of design modifications meeting the challenges of a capricious environment. Nothing seems to stop life from burrowing into every nook and niche capable of meeting its nutritional requirements, thus creating a profusion of form-for-function living units which, by their very existence, flips the bird at the vast lifelessness that apparently makes up the great bulk of the universe."

"The ingenuity of life's survival mechanisms is marvelous," Moonstone said.

"Well, one of the human lifeforms on this planet has already set a deadly plan in motion to reduce our current numbers to more 'manageable' levels," I said. Then I explained to Moonstone what Malcolm Boetes told me. I took off my hat and used it as a fan. My world just then, though filled with the colors, calls and smells of flamingos, seemed a dead world in my soul, a world of purposeless automatons all milling about in pointless configurations toward no conceivable good. "Assuming this Boetes isn't just full of shit," I continued, "I'm filled with horror at both what he's done, and the reason for his doing it. Quite probably there are too damn many of us for our own good. Human beings have depended on warfare, drought, famine and disease for 100,000 years to keep our population down to manageable levels. Boetes' scheme, though implemented for the first time by a single individual's conscious efforts, is nothing new."

I wiped the sweat off my face with my sleeve.

"I recoil at the horror of it," I said, "and the man's presumption that his shit's so much more together than the rest of us that he would, with impunity, pick and choose who's to live and die. Yet I admire his obvious technical and scientific skill: he doesn't have you in a mirror to help him pull such things off. An Elixir of Life and an Elixir of Death: it boggles the mind, Moonstone. It's a situation I must handle, but I must handle it in the right way. I'll confess, I don't know how. My creative energies are wearing terribly thin, I feel way over my depth right about now, I don't have the sense or the stamina I seemed to have when we first met."

I sat down right where I was on the sandy flat, heedless of the flamingo dung or the heat of the sand or the scurrying little creatures living just under the surface of the sand which could

as easily as not have welcomed my bottom with some form of toxic greeting. I simply didn't care. My mental confusion and creative impotence had worn me out.

Moonstone's eyes looked beyond me to the vast tumult of stalk-legs and pink feathers. Then I heard a new and gentle softness in his voice:

"Mr. Shaula," he said, "you've been at this all by yourself for too long. Maybe now's the proper time to introduce you to the other members of your flock."

§

I found myself back in my apartment, surrounded by all that was both familiar and confining. Moonstone stared into my eyes from his mirror and slowly his face faded, lost its sharp resolution, and became, only for a moment, my face, an ordinary reflection in an ordinary mirror. Then my face, too, dissolved, to be replaced by a succession of entities, as yet unimagined and unimaginable, my struggling and yearning counterparts scattered across the length and breadth of the universe:

faces like demons;

faces like angels;

insect faces with compound eyes and armored mandibles;

faces compacted of clouds and clear jelly;

faces immobile as stone, as sharp as blades;

seaspawned faces, fragile as mist;

faces radiating neutrinos, bright as stars;

faces with pseudopods and cilia, whipping tendrils;

faces disjointed through the confluence of multiple dimensions;

faces wise with alien wisdom;

faces perplexed by conflicting desires;

sublime faces, gods grown humble through sacrifice;

pristine faces, mortals turned gods through atonement;

faces, faces, faces, swirled into one maddening vision, borne into my consciousness on the billows of one sibilant Voice, a Voice of many voices, a Message comprising many messages, all of them living beings staring into their mirrors from around the universe, urging me to let their comradely impulses work healing magic on the sickness of my soul . . .

And finally, once more, there was Moonstone.

It was a long time before I could speak. The blackness of the retaining wall stones across the alley outside my window, streaked with scattered specks of reflected bulblight from the many apartments, told me it had long since become night. Throbs of latin music insinuated themselves into the absolute stillness of my apartment. Occasionally one of my pets scratched at a tank or cage, or rolled over in its sleep.

I awoke as if from a trance, or one of those shallow sleeps filled with disconcerting dreams.

"How could I have ever dreamed such beings existed?" I said to Moonstone.

"And what did you think of them?" he asked.

"I heard their minds in my mind, every last one of them. They were warm and consoling. They each knew my pain, having lived through the same sort of confusion and feelings of inadequacy. They wanted me to know that our physical differences, immense as they are, are totally subsumed in our common mission. It was kind of them to welcome me the way they did."

"And now, what do you think of that common mission, Mr. Shaula?"

"Moonstone," I said, "there's only one answer, and that is Life. Profuse, abundant Life. Rampant life, groping life, life without curbs or strictures beyond that which evolves among living beings as they brush elbows in the matter of sharing their living world. Wielding death in the name of life is a non sequitur."

I took Fred, my ferret, out of his cage and let him lick me. He was warm and soft in my arms.

"Which brings me to the matter of Mr. Malcolm Boetes, Genius-at-Large," I said. "I think he's long past due for a lesson on the nature of living . . ."

§

"How did you get in here?" said Malcolm Boetes.

I was doing my best Sam Spade, hat, trenchcoat, the whole bit. "There are very few places I can't get into," I told him. "Not even the human soul's safe from me. Now, it's time you and I had a little talk."

Boetes put a brave face on, but I knew he was shaken.

"I offered you a chance to join me in saving this planet, and you declined," he said. "Let it go at that, before the situation gets ugly."

"I'd say the situation's already pretty ugly. Your Elixir of Death's gotten out of hand. Now it's time for you to set things right, again."

"You're a sentimental ignoramus," he said, sitting down at his desk. "I chose you because you have a reputation for blending transcendental aspirations with a rigorous down-to-earth practicality."

"Much thanks," I said nodding graciously.

"I see now, however, that I overestimated your capacities."

"You're probably right," I said. "I never could stomach wanton murder. My mother could never forgive me this failing."

Boetes grew serious.

"I want you out of here right now," he said.

"Mr Boetes," I said, "kiss my ass." I handed him a piece of paper and a pen. "First, you're going to give me the names of the South African officials who financed your research."

"You're the one who's out of his mind!"

"Then, you're going to come with me for a little

stroll . . ."

I had to laugh when Boetes saw his hand reach out, grab the pen and start writing. "No!" he said, pulling at the wayward hand with his free one. I stared him right in the eyes and the free arm slung itself placidly down at his side, awaiting my further instructions.

"What the hell's going on here?" Boetes shouted, frantic at my complete command of his movements.

"This has nothing to do with hell, Boetes. That's your department."

The page filled with names, titles, private phone lines. I scanned the list, noting a few names from the most secret departments of several governments besides South Africa. "Well, well, well," I said. "It seems that no one government has a monopoly on assholes. How very ecumenical of you to spread the wealth."

"Stop this!" he shouted, trying to thrash his now-immobile body out of his chair and away from the sheet of paper. "You have no right to imprison me like this."

"Please, Boetes," I said. "Hearing you talk about rights makes me want to throw up. I'll let you loose when your hand's all done. The list will be a welcome addition to my computer data-base, for sure."

"You're playing a very dangerous game," he threatened. "Others will make sure you make no use of what you're taking from me."

"Now, you're beginning to bore me," I said. "So I think I'll just shut you up."

And, by God, no matter how he growled and strained, Boetes simply could no longer open his mouth.

When the list was completed, I loosened his limbs and his tongue. I folded the sheet of paper slowly and deliberately, putting it safely in my trenchcoat pocket.

"You anarchist bastard," Boetes spit out. "You fucking liberal humanist . . .!"

"Liberal!" I interrupted. "I'm a radical humanist, Boetes, Mind the distinction. A liberal humanist would let you off with a lecture and a slap on the wrist. I'm too pissed off at you to let that happen."

Boetes' eyes narrowed. "I know what you want. You want my formula. I'll die before I give that to you. . ."

"Suit yourself," I said. "Except that I've already got the formulae for both Elixirs."

"What!"

"Yeah, this little green bird told me. So if you want to die, go right ahead. No one'll miss you, I'm sure. But don't die on my account. Like I said, I just want to take you for a little stroll."

Boetes' legs snapped him upright and marched him around to the front of his desk. The squeal of horror he made reminded me of a toilet-flush shriek I once had to repair down on East 5th Street, back in my handyman days.

"Where are you taking me?" he gasped in horror as his legs propelled him behind me toward the middle of the room.

As he watched me fade slowly away, I said quite simply, "Down memory lane . . ."

§

I figured we'd start from the onychophores and work our way up through stages to the lesser mammals. Sooner or later even Boetes would have to begin to marvel at the preciousness of life in all its diversity, and understand the horror of death in all its many guises.

When, at last, the moth bearing Boetes' face was being systematically stung by the scorpion, I decided I'd had my fill. The rest of Boetes' progress up the evolutionary ladder would have to go on without me. . .

§

I showed up in Larry Welkovitch's dream disguised as Louis Pasteur.

"Dr. Welkovitch," I said, "your days as an unknown medical researcher are numbered. It is your destiny to join the likes of Watson, Descartes, Archimedes, Kepler, and all the rest who attained mystical insights during sleep or deep meditation. Now, this is a very special dream, the dream of a lifetime, if you will. I have this formula which I'm going to dictate and which you remember after you wake up. You can save many lives with this formula; you will become an honored and famous man. Don't worry about the notoriety: you'll handle it. Now listen closely . . ."

§

This time I chose the Mantooska glacier for our conversation, not out of despair or depression but purely for the exhilaration of communing with Moonstone beneath a massive display of Northern Lights.

"What do you think?" I asked.

His large eyes widened as the red and gold phosphors formed themselves into an undulating curtain miles above our heads. "They're very beautiful," he said.

"See, Moonstone," I said, "there's a point at which life evolves and can begin to look out from itself and admire the beauty and intricacy of itself and all the other manifestations of being. Life becomes self-conscious and, I suppose, a bit narcissistic, marveling at how remarkably different it is from rocks and wind and the vast deadness of dust-filled space."

I shut up and watched the Lights.

<§>

13.

CODA

I stood on the edge of the sea, far above the water on cliffs where the albatross roosted, watching a whale blow as it broke through grey water. Then it disappeared and the fog deepened and I never saw it again. I had just been lucky enough to glance in that direction at the very instant it broke through the water, that single point of the compass out of all the infinite points of the compass, and saw the whale. Surely something was meant by that. I'm not a believer in coincidence, only serendipity. I caught the whale surfacing for a purpose.

At least that's what I told myself back then. Back then I was in love.

§

I typed onto the monitor:

"Dante's white-robed ghost appeared to his son, Jacopo, in a dream. Dante died eight months before without arranging for the publication of the final 13 cantos by Can Grande della Scala. The ghost apologized to Jacopo for his thoughtlessness and walked him down to his study. Behind a hanging mat on the wall, the ghost revealed a secret niche, and there they were. The manuscripts."

There was a rather lengthy pause. I felt myself grow impatient. Then:

"THESE THINGS HAPPEN"

She always transmitted in caps and never used punctuation. She preferred to simply space out her clauses and sentences, spreading them around the screen in an apparently

haphazard and often confusing manner. An affectation of youth, I told myself, her jutted-chin rebellion against conventions.

"That's what I mean by 'occult,'" I tried to explain, affording the anecdote some significance.

"I KNEW A GUY ONCE WHO TOLD ME ALL ABOUT

THE OCCULT

HE GAVE ME THE

CREEPS!

I SAID TO HIM ALL THAT STUFF WAS EVIL AND DONE BY THE DEVIL

WHICH MADE HIM SQUIRM

AND BACKTRACK EVERYTHING HE SAID

WITHOUT

ADMITTING

HE CHANGED HIS TUNE JUST BECAUSE

ALL HE WANTED WAS TO SCREW ME

AND TO DO THAT HE KNEW HE'D HAVE TO STAY ON MY GOOD SIDE.

I LAUGHED AND LAUGHED TO MYSELF BECAUSE

NOTHING

NOTHING HE COULD SAY

WOULD EVER GET HIM INTO BED WITH ME

HE MIGHT JUST AS WELL HAVE SLIT HIS OWN THROAT RIGHT THEN

IF HE THOUGHT HE WAS GOING TO DIE WITHOUT MY LOVE

"I see," I typed back. "You're a tough one. La Belle Dame Sans Merci."

I AM

WHAT

I AM

§

"A wife and kids are given to a man," I explained to Moonstone, "so that he'll never know the utter despair in the meaninglessness of life. I don't have either, hence, my mood-swings. I've tried to compensate for them with other orphans like myself -- my pets, my strays, my friends with mental problems -- but it's not the same. There's no flesh of my flesh."

Moonstone looked out at me from the mirror, obviously confused.

"You've put meaning into your life," he said. "Your work, your relationships, your philosophical speculations. . . You should listen to yourself go on and on at night. Why, I must admit I find your ideas fascinating. Yours isn't the sort of soul that wanders in Limbo. I don't understand why you think differently."

I was in a sullen mood.

"I appreciate your kind words," I said, "but a childless man can never pull himself out of the dark well into which he's fallen. He can only look up at the night's ram staring down at him, licking its chops."

Moonstone shook his head, twisting a long lock of green hair.

He seemed frightened.

§

She called herself CYBELE.

"I'm surprised you don't believe in witchcraft and worship the Great Mother Goddess with a name like that," I typed.

I'M

SURPRISED

YOU

READ TAROT CARDS

"I grew up with a deep religiosity stifled within me. My universe wasn't one in which God reigned. I called myself a scientific rationalist back then. I could quote Freud and explain various equations of Einstein and Newton when I was in my early teens. Why, back in second grade I memorized the anatomical overlays in the World Book Encyclopedia! I can still recall most of the bones."

Radius, ulna, metacarpals, carpals, phalanges . . .

OH

I'M IMPRESSED

YOU'RE A SMARTY-PANTS

FOR SURE

"I'm not sure I understand the tone of that last message," I typed back. "If you think I'm bragging, you're mistaken. I'm just giving you the facts, ma'am. Just the facts."

There was another long pause. Then:

SO

How to answer that one. I typed:

"Years later, after I had a couple of degrees and was still living off slumlords who wouldn't pay union wages for contractors and New Yorkers who refused to ride subways or buses, I had an odd experience. At 2:10 AM one morning my soul left my body. I wasn't high, I wasn't trying to meditate myself into an astral projection, I wasn't hallucinating . . . My soul simply left my body and I could watch myself laying in my bed in a bewildered stupor. Then, after I'd had enough, I went back inside myself and sort of woke up. No, it wasn't a dream. My clock now said 2:30. Neurologists may have their own unique metaphors regarding my experience, but I know what happened and have no non-transcendental explanation for twenty minutes of my life. That's when I stopped fearing death and realized that part of me is immortal. That's when I also began to understand serendipity, the uniqueness of the circumstances in which each of us finds himself, the meaningfulness of the universe. "

When I remember how I blathered on and on to that woman who called herself CYBELE, I'm ashamed. I shared too much of myself with a disembodied series of illuminated pixels on my monitor. I cheapened an intimate experience in my hunger to make a friend.

She wrote:

FAR

OUT

SMARTY

-

PANTS

"Never mind," I typed. "Never mind."

There was another long pause. Then:

SO

SMARTY-

PANTS

DO

YOU

WANT TO

MEET ME

SOMEWHERE

I'll admit I was startled. Pleasantly surprised.

"The way you type," I responded, "I can see the rise and fall of ocean waves on my monitor. With a little discipline you could be a poet. Poets are attuned to the ebb and flow of the sea, just like the pulse of blood in their own veins."

FUNNY

YOU SHOULD

PICK THAT

UP

I

LIVE BY THE

SEA

"Then that's where I'll meet you," I concluded. "By the sea."

AND

THEN

"If you're pretty, I'll want to screw you, too. Just like that other guy. That's just the way I am. I mean, I'm not dangerous, you understand. I'm not even impolite. It's just that if you're good-looking I'll want to have sex with you right off the bat, sort of just to get it out of the way so we can see if there's a real relationship lurking in the wings."

HOW

CUNNINGLY

EXPRESSED

"Thank you. I'm honest to a fault."

LONELY TOO

I CAN TELL

YOU SEEM KIND OF

DESPERATE

UNFULFILLED

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU

I felt stung, as if I'd been snapped with a wet towel.

WHAT

IF

I'M

UGLY

I tried not to make my answer seem unduly cold:

"Beauty is, after all, in the eye of the beholder. Relative, the skin deep thing, y'know. Now, if you're a guy, or a tranny, or something else on that side of wild, well, that would be a problem: my necessary parts just wouldn't function, I don't think. But I sense that's not the case, please God. And I'm ready for an adventure."

Then I typed:

"Are you beautiful?"

SOME HAVE SAID SO

WHY NOT FIND OUT

FOR

YOURSELF

"Then we'll meet by the sea."

§

Moonstone had me look deeply into the mirror. His elfin face faded and was replaced by my own. Then my face shifted, growing wide-eyed, ingenuous, the face of my childhood.

"There's your child," Moonstone whispered into my mind.

"No, Moonstone, that's my parents' child. That's me as a boy, the way I looked when my feet couldn't reach the floor even when I sat in those little elementary school chairs."

"Keep looking," Moonstone whispered.

The face shifted again, revealing another child, darker perhaps, a bit less trusting, yet wiser than my brightest hopes. Then a third child's face, and a fourth, and on and on, boy's faces, girl's faces, on and on.

"These are your children, as well," Moonstone whispered. "You as you were, as you will be, life upon life, all of your selves among the infinite dimensions of existence and experience."

The children tucked always inside of you, the children you spend your adult life, life upon life, nurturing."

They passed in review through the magic of the mirror, each child's face seeming to recognize me, acknowledging the kinship. And each seemed to expect from me--and from no other--that secret password, that hidden key, which would reveal in a flash of insight that secret wisdom which all children yearn for, the secret understanding of life's intricacies which children presume to be known by all who are grown-up.

I realized with sudden alarm how little I had to say to each of them.

§

I met her by the edge of the sea, by the verge of tall, rocky cliffs where the albatross dwelled. She stood in water up to her waist, naked, leaning on a rock.

She was, indeed, beautiful.

She watched me, smiling, as I undressed and approached the edge of the lapping waves. Far beyond the horizon the sun descended, trailing mauve and magenta robes.

"It was the Sun-God who tried to impress me with his magic," she called out to me, "but I knew what he was after all the time. Since then, night after night, he blushes with shame as he leaves me."

Her voice was musical, strange and haunting and somehow ancient as the sea, itself.

"I'm sprung more from the moon, myself," I called back. "Changing yet constant. Weak, perhaps, yet resilient."

Her laugh rang like tinkly chimes over the waves and among the rocks.

"I warned you," I called out again. "I do want to make love to you."

She nodded in the affirmative, thrilling my heart.

"I hope you like to swim," she said.

And then I marveled at the emerald-scaled tail which rose from beneath her and followed the rest of her with a sharp slap beneath the waves.

§

That was then, this is now.

Moonstone had given me much, but that last lesson had shown me most of all. A great deal of parenting remained for me to do, in my work, in my life, for myself. And I would have to do it alone. On my own.

My bike was parked on the summit of the cliffs where the albatross roost. From my pack I withdrew the mirror. Standing close to the edge in full moonlight, I looked down at the very waters in which Cybele and I had frolicked.

Moonstone had given me much.

I hefted the mirror and hurled it, much as one would hurl a discus, far out over the water. To this day I can't recall whether the mirror was smashed on the rocks below or captured for a glorious moment by the light of the full moon and simply disappeared.

<§>